

Gratitude: A Value Towards Personal and Social Sustenance

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ABSTRACT

This study focuses on the value of ‘gratitude’ and aims at analysing the place gratitude holds for the contemporary youth. It aims at studying ‘gratitude’ in personal as well as social milieu, along with the degree to which this value is practiced in present times (amongst the youth). The manner and nature of this practice is also studied in this paper, alongside the semantic transition gratitude has undergone. For this purpose, a survey was conducted, in which a total of 22 subjects’ responses were collected. Participants were informed that their responses/personal details will be kept confidential. Responses collected were later on studied, and it was thereafter concluded that ‘gratitude’ as a value is still present amongst the youth of today. Its practice has become highly subjective in the contemporary times. Gratitude, as a value system, has taken different shapes over time, which leads to a change in its definition, nature, and degree of practice. It remains, nonetheless, a value still intact within the contemporary youth in various forms, though its practice could be enhanced.

Keywords: *Change, Gratitude, Meaning, Nature, Practice, Value, Youth*

The white paper published at the University of California in 2018 defines gratitude as having a threefold structure: it could either be a trait, an emotion, or a mood (Allen, 2018). Gratitude in general terms however is the feeling of thankfulness, whether expressed or implicit. An article published by the National Library of Medicine in November 2010 defines it in a much better manner. It terms gratitude “as the appreciation of what is valuable and meaningful to oneself” (Sasone and Sasone, 2010).

Emmons and Crumpler define gratitude in the following manner in their 2004 article “Counting blessings versus burdens: An experimental investigation of gratitude and subjective well-being in daily life”:— “Gratitude has been conceptualized as an emotion, a virtue, a moral sentiment, a motive, a coping response, a skill, and an attitude. It is all of these and more ...” (484). In general sense, gratitude can be termed as the presence, realisation, and acceptance of something positive in an individual’s life, which enhances the quality of a person’s daily endeavours.

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Gratitude: A Value Towards Personal and Social Sustenance

The above discussion thus defines gratitude around the following cardinal aspects: that gratitude is dynamic, malleable, and diverse in nature. This subjectivity of gratitude shall be studied in this paper.

Objective And Hypothesis

This paper focuses on the study of the value of gratitude and aims at analysing whether it is practiced amongst the youth of today. It, therefore, focuses chiefly on the below aspects as its primary aim:

- What meaning gratitude holds for the youth of today
- Whether it is practiced amongst them; if yes, this paper aims to study the nature and extent (degree) of this practice.

The hypothesis assumes that the value of gratitude is still present amongst the youth of today. The way people define and practice this value, however, has definitely changed. It has evolved to be rather subjective and context-based. This feeling of gratitude can be felt for not only other individuals or people but also inanimate objects/things.

METHODOLOGY

For this study, both qualitative and quantitative methods of data collection were utilized. First, a survey was conducted. All collected responses were then analysed and transformed into a quantitative form, in order to decode patterns and establish relationships. The responses were then interpreted in their actual, descriptive form, for a qualitative analysis. Personal details and responses of the participants have been kept confidential. Previous studies were also referred in the interpretation and introduction sections for a holistic analysis. Afterwards, the results were derived and added towards the end of the study.

Sampling — The sample size taken was of 22 participants. The age group was kept in the range of 20 — 25. As this study pertains to the definition and practice of ‘gratitude’ amongst the youth of today, this age group suited best to the purpose. The study was conducted in India, with a majority of the participants residing in the state of Uttar Pradesh, with a few residing in others, for example: Gujarat (1), Telangana (1), and Maharashtra (1).

Research Procedure

This study aimed at analysing the place which gratitude holds amongst the youth of today. It aimed at studying the meaning that gratitude holds for the contemporary youth and the various ways in which they practice it.

For the purpose of this study, the survey method was chosen. Data was first collected in the form of this survey, from 22 participants. The responses collected served the base for conducting a qualitative analysis. However, this data was later on transformed into a quantitative form, for an apt, numeric representation. The study therefore applied a mixed method approach.

A study published in 2020 aimed at “researching the effects of gratitude on the integration process of self-transcendent experiences (STEs)” (Prem, 2020). It, too, opted for a similar method of qualitative analysis. The rationale for choosing the quantitative method in addition was “to increase the ethical value of those data” (Rosnow & Rosenthal, 2011).

After determining the nature of the study, a set of questions was formed. They were then formulated in the form of a survey, keeping in mind the open-endedness of these questions.

Gratitude: A Value Towards Personal and Social Sustenance

A total of seven questions were formed, keeping the study compact yet wide-ranging. They aimed at studying the various elements included within this study, such as the meaning, nature, practice, and the change in the value of gratitude, etc. The intention behind leaving the questions open-ended was to leave ample space for a better and comprehensive analysis. The mixed nature of the methods involved becomes all the more crucial, due to the abstract and varied nature of the value being discussed in this paper.

A study conducted at the University of Turin in 2019 also went for this combined approach, where data collected from a survey was heavily accompanied by descriptive responses from the participants in another form. It chose a “mix-method study, with a survey and a diary” (Cortini et al., 2019).

After the survey was formulated, it was shared with participants with the help of Google Forms. Responses were collected throughout a three-day period, and participants were informed of their responses/personal details being kept confidential. No external cue or instruction was given to the participants, due to the possibility of data being tampered. After all the responses were collected, they were grouped and analysed in separate sections first, all in their qualitative form. This was done in order to cater to the study of all the previously mentioned elements separately. Most of the responses from these questions are also mentioned in the respective sub-sections, in order to enhance the credibility of the research. They have been serialized in a bulleted format for easier readability. Some of the responses have also been quoted in verbatim form and labelled with initials (in a randomized manner) for reference purposes. This data was later on transformed into a quantitative form, in order to establish relationships and observable patterns. This entire process of data analysis and interpretation was conducted over the period of two weeks.

An introduction was added at the very start of the paper, in order to provide ample background and information concerning the chief elements involved in this study, for example, gratitude and its general meaning. This was done in order to provide the readers and researchers a better idea of the problem and research question at hand.

The data interpretation (Results and Discussion) section forms the central focus of this paper, in total consisting of seven subsections. These seven sub-sections pertained to the seven questions that were chosen for the purpose of the survey. They were formed in order to give a detailed analysis of the various elements being analysed in this study, such as the change in the meaning of gratitude over time, change in its nature, practice, etc. Qualitative and quantitative methods of analysis were first employed separately in all the sub-sections, i.e., all the responses to the seven questions were first separately analysed. After which, a combined results/conclusions section was added towards the end. This conclusion contains the overall result of the entire study and has been formed keeping in consideration the data analysed in all the seven sub-sections.

The patterns and relationships observed in data have also been included in a text-box format in certain sub-sections.

DATA INTERPRETATION: RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. How do you define gratitude?

In this section, it was determined via the collected data that 40.9 % of the responding participants described the feeling of gratitude as the feeling/expression of being “thankful”. 18.18 % of the participants recorded being grateful in terms of other individuals. In a study

Gratitude: A Value Towards Personal and Social Sustenance

published by the National Library of Medicine, called the “Effects of gratitude intervention on mental health and well-being among workers”, claims how this feature of ‘thankfulness’ within gratitude extends even to a person’s professional life. The study claimed that “gratitude trait at work is defined as the tendency to recognize and be thankful for how various aspects of a job affect one’s life” (Komase et al., 2021). Moreover, this study also takes ‘thankfulness’ as one of its parameters during data collection and interpretation processes. This proves how ‘thankfulness’ remains a feature correlated with the value of gratitude not only in this study but also in other studies.

However, a majority of the responses defined gratefulness as a feeling that can refer not only to an individual but also a ‘thing’ or a ‘situation’. A participant even recorded in this regard that gratitude can be felt for any “memory, a person, an object or something abstract”.

Moreover, participants described being grateful with one word substitutions, such as by using terms such as ‘content’, ‘appreciation’, and ‘satisfied’.

There also seemed responses that were rather unique and heterogenous in nature, some of them are listed below:

- Gratitude as a “sense of stability”
- Gratitude as “exchange of Goodness”
- Gratitude as a value “capable of assisting others in a positive way” and capable of formulating a “positive ambiance”.

It is therefore also seen that gratitude, as the hypothesis assumes, is subjective and context-based. It is not always definable in succinct terms but can be explained on the basis of individual perceptions. Moreover, temporal fluctuations also affect the expression of gratitude: “From childhood to old age, a wide array of psychological, physical, and relational benefits are associated with gratitude.” (Gallagher et al., 2019)

B. Is it something you practice in your life?

To this question, out of the 18 recorded responses, around 94.44 % of the participants responded in agreement.

Many responses largely remained descriptive in this ‘Yes/No’ form of question. This shows the participants’ sense of interest in the subject and their attitude of readiness towards the topic.

Moreover, approximately 44 % of the responses used temporal indicators such as “Always”, “daily”, “Often”, “Many a times”, “frequently”. Such responses are enthusiastic, self-expressive, and represent a behavioural way of expression. Considering the fact such descriptions were not a solicited demand of the question, the responses show an overall positive attitude towards the topic at hand. In this regard one must also consider the findings of Emmons and McCullough (2003), who “employed a self-guided journal method to determine the effect of gratitude on wellbeing among college students. Their findings revealed that those who recorded grateful thoughts had positive results (i.e. increased in positive emotions, altruistic behaviour and fewer physical complaints).” (Siew & Lai, 2017) Therefore, even the simplest engagement in the practice of gratitude improves the quality of life to a significant extent.

C. What is your way of practicing gratitude?

In this section, out of the 22 recorded responses, 72 % of the participants expressed their practice of gratitude in terms of other individuals, i.e., via expressing thanks and appreciation to other people. This detail is significant, as it negates the preconceived notion that the contemporary youth is becoming rather detached from meaningful, social relationships. This is important, especially considering the fact that a study conducted in 2021 found that “gratitude is positively correlated with the quality of life among adolescents”. (Anand et al., 2021)

Moving forward, roughly 28 % of the participants expressed their manner of practicing gratitude in terms of thanking the “almighty”.

Many others described practicing gratitude with the help of journals, affirmations, self-love, meditation, meditative walks, gestures, etc.

Such descriptions are tokens of the shift in the meaning of gratitude and in the nature of its practice. How gratitude as an abstract quality is given a tangible shape by the youth of today is also reflected via these descriptions.

The data in this section therefore determines that the youth of today is emotionally intelligent. This section also proves true the hypothesis — that the way of practicing gratitude has evolved to be more and more subjective, i.e., it is different for different people.

D. How important do you think gratitude is amongst the youth of today?

Responses in this section were majorly in the favour of the importance of gratitude, with roughly 41% of the participants using the term “important” in their descriptions.

Participants asserted the importance of gratitude especially in the present scenario, where materialism, distractions, stagnating mental health and social media prevalence degrade the value’s presence on a commonplace basis. Some participants also related the value to ethics, mindfulness, manners, harmony, empathy, kindness, manifestation, and as a path towards achievements. These correlations of gratitude with other aspects of life are important: “The findings revealed that gratitude is significantly related to adolescents’ quality of life. Additionally, mindfulness is a potential mediator of the relationship between gratitude and quality of life.” (Anand et al., 2021)

This section therefore established how even when gratitude, in its degree and manner, is practiced distinctly by people, the central idea remains the same. Four responses, however, recorded the value’s gradual decline. One such participant responds:

This generation is not conscious pertaining to the real meaning of gratitude, the youth of today just know how to get benefited from others and nothing else. Gratitude doesn't hold any crucial position in the youth of this generation, What they know is just to squeeze out the things that they want form others though they don't deserve it, and in return what they render that they deserve and worked hard for it.

This observation was followed by another comment from a respondent, which was rather deviant from the rest: “Too much gratitude is also problematic, and it indicates a lack of self-esteem and judgment” — this participant recorded.

Gratitude: A Value Towards Personal and Social Sustenance

On an overall basis however, the importance gratitude carries in the present times, by majority, remains at a pedestal, with the value still having crucial importance for the youth of today. The participants showed an awareness of the importance of gratitude in the present times. To support this importance, the results of a study of 2014, published in the sixth issue of The Journal of Positive Psychology at Taylor & Francis Online, showed that “gratitude exercise decreased depressive symptoms among participants high in such symptoms at baseline and eliminated the negative effect of low baseline trait gratitude on later happiness, positive emotions, and depressive symptoms.” (Harbaugh & Vasey, 2014)

E. To what extent do you think it is observed and practiced amongst the youth of today? Questions this section onwards are replete with detailed descriptions, by the very nature of the questions here forth.

This section showcased interesting and unique detail in terms of the data collected. The following sections carry specific importance for the purpose of this study.

The results in this section however correspond to three distinct types of responses. See the text box [A].

NO

Around 45.47 % of the participant responded with a no to this question. The responses reflected in majority that the practice of gratitude amongst the youth of today is towards a rapid decline.

YES

27.27 % of the participants showcased an agreement when asked whether gratitude is being practiced by the youth of today. However, more than half of the responses (4 out of 6) in this section resorted to ambiguous and vague language in their descriptions, using terms such as “I think”, “sometimes” and “mostly”. This lead to an understanding of some form of incertitude, ambivalence, and divide.

AMBIVALENT/NEUTRAL

22.72 % of the participants, interestingly, chose the middle ground and reflected a dilemma and incertitude once again. They used excessive words and lengthy descriptions for portraying their point. This reflected not having any well-defined clarity on this matter.

TEXT BOX A

This analysis therefore presumes a cardinal importance in this paper, as this ambivalence will continue forward in the other two questions.

F. What further measures do you think we can take for enhancing the practice of gratitude in our lives?

Participants described various ways in which gratitude could be enhanced in the lives of people today. Some of these methods are mentioned below. They reveal significantly about the mindset and thought process of the current youth. Please note, the symbol “...” denotes the actual, non-paraphrased responses from the participants. In order to keep the anonymity of the participants intact, randomized initials have been used to label some significant responses, solely for reference purposes:

- Meditation (three participants recorded the same)
- Being present in the moment, slowing down

Gratitude: A Value Towards Personal and Social Sustenance

- Instilling gratitude from a young age
- Diary writing, prayers
- Daily appreciation
- Expressing gratitude on a community-oriented level, for example to community workers, traffic police, cleaners, teachers, parents, peers, etc. This cycle can be further continued by encouraging the very same people to express gratitude to several others.
- Encouragement of smaller things in life
- Taking the first step ourselves
- “Cultivating mindfulness to recognize blessings” — Participant E recorded. The respondent adds, “Set reminders to pause and reflect on gratitude. Practice self-reflection through journaling or meditation. Regularly express gratitude to others. Focus on finding the positive in every situation.”
- “By teaching the importance of gratitude to the new generation”:— Another participant recorded.
- Developing gratitude as a daily habit via involving it in a routine, either by journaling, reflection, or acts of kindness. To find a method that works and committing to it.
- Participant M believes in cultivating mindfulness “to become more aware of the positive aspects of your life and the opportunities for gratitude that surround you each day. Mindfulness practices such as meditation can help you develop this awareness.”
- Practicing gratitude “for the here and now”
- Not dwelling on past
- To express gratitude to others for their contributions. This could be done via a note, a “heartfelt conversation”, or even a gesture
- Shifting perspectives could help, i.e. looking for the silver lining in challenging situations and finding things to be grateful.
- Spending more time with family
- Speaking with our peers, elders and our own selves humbly; treating everyone the way we want others to serve us
- Putting conscious efforts; Being kind to oneself and to all. Gratitude will come automatically.
- Gratitude towards our daily life activities
- Celebration of life
- An interesting response, from participant J, recorded:
Inculcating the feeling that we cannot do everything on our own and as human beings, we have been brought up by an entire society, including farmers, tradesmen, businessmen, teachers, family, friends, neighborhood, authors of our books, our bus drivers, house cleaners, etc. Humans are social animals and practicing gratitude only enhances the quality of life. For that, people should call the people, thank them then and there at times, should be dutiful human.

There were other responses holding a distinct point of view, i.e. being variants: for example, participant K records — “I don't think we can enhance the practice of gratitude it's only natural and kind of a law forged in society.”

Gratitude: A Value Towards Personal and Social Sustenance

These findings have one commonality — gratitude is seen being a much bigger value than just a value existing in a personal sense. Robert A. Emmons, in the preface to his 2013 book, *Gratitude Works: A 21-Day Program for Creating Emotional Prosperity*, defined gratitude as being capable of taking us “outside our scope so we see ourselves as part of a larger, intricate network of sustaining relationships”. This definition fits the responses of the participants in an apt manner, as they describe gratitude not just in the personal sense, rather more on the community-oriented level.

G. Do you feel there has been a change in the meaning of gratitude over the previous and current generations?

This section, too, follows the above trifold pattern. See text box B.

YES

71.42 % of the participants responded that there has been a change in the meaning of gratitude over the generations.

NO

9.52 % of the participants recorded that the value has remain unchanged over the specified period.

AMBIVALENT/NEUTRAL

19.04% of the participants remained ambivalent, ambiguous, and neutral in their responses. The terms used in were “maybe”, “I believe”, “not aware”, etc.

TEXT BOX B

Overall, the present section showcases how people interpret this ‘change’. A major sub-theme included many participants placing the responsibility on social media and express its role in glamorizing and making a trend out of expressing this value. Many used the term ‘trend’ in their responses. Many participants also agreed however that this change is not in the essence rather in the practice of the value and in the degree and nature of this practice.

This section of the study therefore corresponds to the claim that amongst the contemporary youth, the value of gratitude faces some alterations in its ‘degree’ and ‘nature’ of practice. When we combine these findings with the findings of a survey study, published in the second volume of the journal *Innovation in Aging*, we find that gratitude is interlinked with the concept of generativity. Generativity is defined by Erik Erikson (1963) as that which sustains in people the desire to move away from self-interest and move towards leaving a legacy behind, in worry of the continuation of life after them (Martin et al., 2018).

Many participants also recorded that the value has become a “chore” and a “compulsion” in present times and that it has become more of a “formality” than an expression of true feelings.

Detailed descriptions of the changes that some of the participants expressed in their responses are mentioned below:

- Gratitude has become a trend and a chore. Social media unnecessarily complicates it.
- It has become a random word with less to no meaning. Some have even never experienced this value.

Gratitude: A Value Towards Personal and Social Sustenance

- There has been a shift in the meanings attributed to gratitude. The previous generation expressed gratitude for even the smallest achievement. The youth of today however believe that it was their hard work only.
- There has been a shift in the attitude towards gratitude. Expressing gratitude has become a job. The value is being glamorised for attention on social media.
- People do not understand the actual meaning of gratitude, which they did earlier.
- The expression has become way more formal way now and feelings are not there.
- Gratitude has become a compulsion and not a responsibility.
- There may have been a shift in the meaning of gratitude over the previous and the current generation, due to the difference in times. Previously, the value was tied to religion and morals, at present it is a psychological practice. Social media has altered the ways in which one may express their gratefulness. Publicity stunts and public displays have become rather common. Nonetheless, gratitude as a force has definitely fostered positive emotions, personal growth and meaningful relationships over the years.
- The concept has remained consistent over the generations, but time has changed its meaning.
- The meaning remains similar, but the way of expressing has evolved.
- There has been a change as selfishness has increased in today's times.
- Perhaps it has evolved and is more prominently practiced now.
- Changes have been both incremental as well as decremental. Gratitude has become a part of mental health, however, only as a trend.
- While the previous generation was ambiguous over everything [lack of education], things like gratitude were practiced as a social construct. Self-awareness and education are imparted largely to the current generation. "The current generation must grow up to be a generation, who will be grateful in the right manner to the right things, much precisely." — participant O recorded an interesting viewpoint in this regard.

CONCLUSION

This study, titled 'Gratitude: A Value Towards Personal and Social Sustenance', was conducted in order to study the value of gratitude amongst the youth of today. It was conducted in the form of a survey, which had a range of seven questions. These questions aimed at analysing different elements of gratitude, such as its definition, importance, and meaning amongst the youth of today. The seven questions were first analysed separately in seven sub-sections, after which an overall conclusion was framed, taking into consideration the established data, patterns, and relationships.

This study concludes that gratitude, as a value, is still practiced amongst the youth of today. Data collected gives evidence of the fact that a majority of the present youth assuredly practices gratitude, especially in terms of individual relationships (72%). However, the meaning of gratitude has undergone a significant change, i.e. it has extended in its nature and practice.

The above is proven with the help of the collected responses. Many participants, as recorded earlier, described various ways of practicing gratitude. These ways differed from person to person, some examples being journal writing, taking meditative walks, affirmations, etc. The above data therefore also reveals how gratitude, in its meaning, is being practiced by the youth of today both in its personal as well as social parameters.

Gratitude: A Value Towards Personal and Social Sustenance

The place gratitude held for the youth of today was evident in their realisation as well as acceptance of the possible scope for improvement within its practice. Respondents expressed that gratitude as a value is yet to be inculcated in majority of the youth population (45.47%). In another sub-section, when asked for the possible ways through which this could be possible, responses reflected the importance of instilling this value in an early age. Community level engagements educating regarding the importance of gratitude were also emphasized. Respondents, however, focused heavily upon the overall importance of perspective and mindset shifts in relation to this value, expressing, once again, the importance of early educative and moral lessons.

Some of the responses showed an ambivalence present in the data. Respondents remained neutral to many questions, having an unclear answer.

This study therefore overall concludes that the value of gratitude is still present amongst the youth of today. However, the manner in which it is practised has definitely changed. It has evolved from just an expression of thanks to now being inculcated in the form of various lifestyle choices. Data corresponding to this claim includes responses of participants, who resort to affirmations, meditative walks, diary writing, meditation, etc., for practicing gratitude.

Moreover, gratitude has also evolved, for the present youth, in terms of its nature, i.e., it is now being practiced not just within the dynamics of interpersonal relationships but also on a more personal/individual end. Responses that serve as data in this regard include participants reflecting upon mindfulness practices, practicing gratitude as a daily habit, prayers, etc., as means of practicing gratitude.

Data collected, however, also revealed possible scope for improvement. Nonetheless, the research question posed at the start of the study — as to whether gratitude is yet intact as a practice amongst the youth of today — remains answered. Gratitude, indeed, is intact within the present-day youth, even though its definition, meaning, and nature of practice have changed.

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Gratitude: A Value Towards Personal and Social Sustenance

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Conflict of Interest

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