

Gratitude, Compassion, and Spiritual Well-being: Associations and Gender Differences among Young Adults

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ABSTRACT

Background: Positive psychology emphasizes strengths and processes that promote human flourishing and well-being. Building on this perspective, **Aim:** The present study investigates associations among gratitude, compassion, and spiritual well-being, as well as gender differences in these constructs. **Methods:** This study used a cross-sectional correlational design on a sample of 140 young adults (70 males, 70 females; aged 22–32 years). Participants completed standardized self-report measures of the Gratitude Questionnaire (GQ-6) (McCullough et al., 2002), the Dispositional Positive Emotions Scale (DPES) - compassion subscale (Shiota et al., 2006), and the Spiritual Well-being Questionnaire (SWBQ) (Fisher, 2010). Pearson product-moment correlations and independent samples t-tests were conducted to examine relationships among variables and to assess gender differences. **Results:** Gratitude, compassion, and spiritual well-being were all moderately and positively correlated (gratitude-compassion $r=.51$; gratitude-spiritual well-being $r=.47$; compassion-spiritual well-being $r=.54$; all $p<.001$). **Conclusion:** The findings reveal that Females reported significantly higher gratitude and compassion than males, whereas gender differences in spiritual well-being were in the expected direction but did not reach statistical significance. Overall, the findings highlight a link between interrelated positive traits and partial gender differentiation, emphasizing the value of considering gratitude, compassion, and spiritual well-being together in research on young adults.

Keywords: *Gratitude, Compassion, Spiritual well-being, Gender differences, Positive psychology, Young adults*

Mental well-being is widely recognized as a fundamental component of a thriving life, reflecting the long-established interconnection between psychological and physical health. Individuals with good mental health are better equipped to cope with stress, engage in learning, maintain meaningful interpersonal relationships, and function productively within their communities (World Health Organization, 2025). In recent decades, psychological research has increasingly moved beyond an exclusive focus on distress, dysfunction, and psychopathology to examine the strengths and experiences that enable individuals to flourish. This shift is symbolized in the field of positive psychology, which complements traditional clinical approaches by systematically investigating positive

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Gratitude, Compassion, and Spiritual Well-being: Associations and Gender Differences among Young Adults

emotions, character strengths, and meaning-making processes that contribute to well-being (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000; Peterson & Seligman, 2004).

Within this framework, gratitude, compassion, and spiritual well-being have emerged as salient and potentially interrelated psychological resources that support resilience and adaptive functioning.

Gratitude is conceptualized in multiple ways across contexts, but in psychological research, it is commonly described as an appreciative orientation toward positive aspects of life, including benefits received from others or from one's circumstances (Wood et al., 2010). Empirical evidence generally supports a positive association between gratitude and well-being; however, findings also suggest that this relationship may be complex and context-dependent, rather than uniformly beneficial across all situations (Sansone & Sansone, 2010). Gratitude is conceptually distinct from other positive traits such as optimism, as it emphasizes the recognition and valuing of positive experiences that have already occurred, whereas optimism is more strongly oriented toward expectations for the future (Wood et al., 2010). Beyond individual dispositions, gratitude appears to be shaped through interpersonal and socialization processes. Research examining family influences indicates that parental behaviours—particularly maternal warmth and gratitude-oriented socialization practices—may play an important role in fostering gratitude during development, with potential downstream benefits for psychological adjustment and self-esteem (Yang et al., 2017; Alfieri et al., 2018). Conceptually, gratitude may also serve as a foundation for outward-oriented emotional responses by increasing sensitivity to others and appreciation of shared human experiences.

The scientific understanding of compassion has transitioned from a basic emotional theory to a complex, multi-dimensional framework. Early foundations positioned compassion as an "empathic emotion" triggered by witnessing another's hardship, characterized primarily by an inherent urge to diminish that person's distress (Lazarus, 1991). This concept was later expanded to include a philosophical dimension, viewing compassion as both a reactive emotional state and a fundamental moral virtue (Crisp, 2008). Modern research has further refined the construct by emphasizing its "action-oriented" nature, which distinguishes it from related states like empathy or pity (Goetz et al., 2010). Under this view, compassion requires not only an acute sensitivity to suffering but also a functional, genuine motivation to intervene and provide relief (Goetz et al., 2010). This evolution has culminated in contemporary definitions that describe compassion as a cohesive, five-element commitment involving the recognition of distress and a sustained effort to prevent or alleviate it (Strauss et al., 2016). Recent empirical work using narrative analysis supports this multifaceted view, revealing that higher compassion is associated with more agentic and relational storytelling during stressful life events (Zieba et al., 2025).

Spiritual well-being represents an existential dimension of psychological functioning characterized by a sense of meaning, purpose, and connectedness with oneself, others, nature, and, for some individuals, a transcendent reality (Ellison, 1983; Fisher, 2011). Early conceptualizations of spirituality were often closely tied to religious beliefs, doctrines, and the notion of the soul (Schneiders, 1986; Muldoon & King, 1995). Contemporary perspectives, however, conceptualize spiritual well-being as a multidimensional and inclusive construct that may be experienced independently of formal religious affiliation. Fisher's (2011) relational model, for example, emphasizes dynamic relationships across

Gratitude, Compassion, and Spiritual Well-being: Associations and Gender Differences among Young Adults

personal, communal, environmental, and transcendental domains, allowing for both religious and secular expressions of spirituality. Empirical research has linked spiritual well-being to psychological adjustment, life satisfaction, and adaptive coping, underscoring its relevance to holistic well-being.

Although gratitude, compassion, and spiritual well-being share conceptual overlap and are often discussed within the broader framework of positive psychology, they have frequently been examined independently in empirical research. Integrated examinations of these constructs remain relatively limited, particularly among young adults. Young adulthood represents a critical developmental period marked by identity exploration, value formation, and heightened engagement with existential questions related to meaning and purpose. During this stage, individuals actively construct personal belief systems and relational orientations that may have long-term implications for psychological well-being. Examining the interrelations among gratitude, compassion, and spiritual well-being during young adulthood, therefore, offers valuable insight into how these strengths operate during a formative phase of development.

Gender differences further warrant consideration in the study of positive psychological constructs. Prior research suggests that females may report higher levels of gratitude, compassion, and spiritually oriented well-being than males, potentially reflecting socialization patterns and gendered norms related to emotional expression and relational orientation (Skalski & Pochwatko, 2020). However, findings in this area are not entirely consistent, and evidence varies across samples and cultural contexts. This inconsistency highlights the need for continued empirical investigation of gender differences within integrated models of positive psychological functioning.

Accordingly, the present study examines the relationships among gratitude, compassion, and spiritual well-being in young adulthood, while also exploring potential gender differences in these constructs.

Based on these objectives, the following hypotheses were formulated:

- **Hypothesis 1:** There will be a significant positive relationship between gratitude and spiritual well-being among young adults.
- **Hypothesis 2:** There will be a significant positive relationship between compassion and spiritual well-being among young adults.
- **Hypothesis 3:** There will be a significant positive relationship between gratitude and compassion among young adults.
- **Hypothesis 4:** Females will report significantly higher gratitude, compassion, and spiritual well-being than males among young adults.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Participants

This study used a cross-sectional correlational design to investigate relationships among gratitude, compassion, spiritual well-being, and gender differences. Participants completed standardized self-report measures, allowing to examine naturally occurring associations without manipulating variables. The design was well-suited to our balanced sample of 70 males and 70 females, enabling meaningful gender comparisons alongside the primary correlational analyses.

Gratitude, Compassion, and Spiritual Well-being: Associations and Gender Differences among Young Adults

The study included 140 young adult students (age 22–32 years) from Guru Nanak Dev University (GNDU), Amritsar, India, recruited using convenience sampling. The final sample consisted of 140 participants, including 70 males (50%) and 70 females (50%).

Measures

- 1. The Gratitude Questionnaire (GQ-6) by Michael E. McCullough et al. (2002):** Gratitude was assessed using the Gratitude Questionnaire-6 (GQ-6; McCullough et al., 2002), a 6-item scale designed to measure trait gratitude, or the dispositional tendency to experience gratitude in everyday life. The items are rated on a 7-point response format (1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree). Items 3 and 6 are reverse-scored, and item scores are summed; higher totals indicate higher levels of gratitude.
- 2. Dispositional Positive Emotions Scale (DPES) - compassion subscale Shiota et al. (2006):** Dispositional compassion was measured using the Compassion subscale of the Dispositional Positive Emotion Scales (DPES; Shiota et al., 2006). Only the Compassion subscale was administered (5 items), rated on a 7-point scale (1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree), with higher scores indicating higher dispositional compassion.
- 3. Spiritual Well-Being Questionnaire (SWBQ) by Fisher (2010):** Spiritual well-being was assessed using the “how you feel” (lived-experience) component of SHALOM, also referred to as the Spiritual Well-Being Questionnaire (SWBQ; Fisher, 2010). It contains 20 items across four domains (Personal, Communal, Environmental, Transcendental) rated on a 1–5 scale (1 = very low to 5 = very high), with higher scores indicating higher spiritual well-being.

Procedure

Data were collected using both in-person (paper-based) and online administration. Participants completed the measures after providing informed consent. Participation was voluntary, and participants were informed they could withdraw without penalty. All responses were kept confidential.

Statistical Analysis

Data were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics (Version 21). Prior to the main analyses, the dataset was screened for missing values and completeness. Descriptive statistics, including means and standard deviations, were calculated for gratitude, compassion, and spiritual well-being. Skewness and kurtosis values were examined to assess the normality of the distributions.

To examine the relationships among the study variables, Pearson’s product–moment correlation analysis was conducted to assess the relationships among gratitude, compassion, and spiritual well-being. Additionally, independent samples *t*-tests were performed to examine gender differences in gratitude, compassion, and spiritual well-being among participants. A significance level of $p < .05$ was used for all inferential statistical analyses.

RESULTS

Descriptive Statistics

The study comprised 140 young adult participants (70 males, 50%; 70 females, 50%) aged 22–32 years from Guru Nanak Dev University, Amritsar, India. Descriptive statistics revealed moderate levels across the variables: gratitude ($M = 30.50$, $SD = 6.40$), compassion

Gratitude, Compassion, and Spiritual Well-being: Associations and Gender Differences among Young Adults

(M = 28.14, SD = 6.46), and spiritual well-being (M = 67.76, SD = 19.68). Skewness and kurtosis values were within acceptable ranges, indicating approximate normality.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics for Study Variables (N = 140)

Variable	M	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis
Gratitude	30.50	6.40	-0.23	-0.79
Compassion	28.14	6.46	-1.74	3.46
Spiritual well-being	67.76	19.68	-0.40	0.13

Correlation Analysis

Pearson product-moment correlations were computed to examine associations among gratitude, compassion, and spiritual well-being (Hypotheses 1–3). Gratitude was positively correlated with spiritual well-being, $r=.47$, $p<.001$, supporting Hypothesis 1. Compassion was also positively correlated with spiritual well-being, $r=.54$, $p<.001$, supporting Hypothesis 2. Finally, gratitude was positively associated with compassion, $r=.51$, $p<.001$, supporting Hypothesis 3. All correlations were moderate in magnitude, indicating that higher levels of gratitude and compassion were linked with higher spiritual well-being among young adults.

Table 2: Correlations Among Gratitude, Compassion, and Spiritual well-being

Variable	Gratitude	Compassion	Spiritual Well-being
1. Gratitude	—	.51**	.47**
2. Compassion	.51**	—	.54**
3. Spiritual Well-being	.47**	.54**	—

Note. $N = 140$, $p < .01$

Gender Differences

Independent-samples t tests were conducted to examine gender differences in gratitude, compassion, and spiritual well-being. The sample included 70 males and 70 females.

Females reported significantly higher levels of gratitude than males, $t(138) = -3.28$, $p = .001$, indicating greater appreciation among women in this sample. Similarly, females exhibited significantly greater compassion than males, $t(138) = -2.37$, $p = .019$, consistent with expectations of stronger other-oriented concern in females. However, differences in spiritual well-being were non-significant, $t(138) = -1.70$, $p = .092$, despite females showing slightly higher scores. These results partially support Hypothesis 4, confirming predicted gender differences for gratitude and compassion while indicating spiritual well-being may operate more independently of gender in young adults.

Table 3: Gender Differences in Gratitude, Compassion, and Spiritual well-being

Variable	Gender	n	M	SD	t(138)	p
Gratitude	Male	70	28.79	6.62	-3.28	.001
	Female	70	32.21	5.72		
Compassion	Male	70	26.87	7.02	-2.37	.019
	Female	70	29.41	5.61		
Spiritual Well-being	Male	70	64.96	22.64	-1.70	.092
	Female	70	70.57	15.87		

Gratitude, Compassion, and Spiritual Well-being: Associations and Gender Differences among Young Adults

The results supported Hypotheses 1–3, indicating significant moderate positive correlations among gratitude, compassion, and spiritual well-being. These findings suggest that higher levels of gratitude were associated with higher levels of compassion and spiritual well-being, and compassion was also positively related to spiritual well-being.

Hypothesis 4 received partial support. Independent samples *t*-tests revealed significant gender differences in gratitude and compassion, with females reporting higher mean scores than males. However, no significant gender difference was observed for spiritual well-being. Overall, the results indicate that while gratitude and compassion vary across gender, spiritual well-being appears relatively similar among male and female participants.

DISCUSSION

The present study examined the relationships among gratitude, compassion, and spiritual well-being among young adults, while also exploring potential gender differences in these constructs. The findings revealed significant positive correlations among all three variables, indicating that individuals who reported higher levels of gratitude also tended to report higher compassion and greater spiritual well-being. Additionally, gender differences were observed in gratitude and compassion, with females reporting significantly higher levels than males, whereas no significant gender difference emerged in spiritual well-being.

The positive association between gratitude and spiritual well-being supports the first hypothesis and aligns with previous theoretical and empirical work within positive psychology. Gratitude has been conceptualized as an appreciative orientation toward positive experiences and interpersonal benefits, which may foster a deeper sense of meaning and life satisfaction (McCullough et al., 2002; Wood et al., 2010). Individuals who habitually recognize and appreciate positive aspects of life are more likely to develop a broader perspective of life events, which may contribute to feelings of purpose, connectedness, and existential fulfillment. Similarly, research has demonstrated that gratitude is positively associated with multiple indicators of psychological well-being and life satisfaction (Emmons & McCullough, 2003; Wood et al., 2010). Within Fisher's (2011) multidimensional framework of spiritual well-being, which includes personal, communal, environmental, and transcendental domains, gratitude may strengthen individuals' sense of connection with others and with broader existential values, thereby enhancing spiritual well-being.

The study also found a significant positive relationship between compassion and spiritual well-being, supporting the second hypothesis. Compassion can be understood as recognizing the suffering of others and feeling motivated to alleviate it (Goetz et al., 2010; Strauss et al., 2016). Such concern for others may enhance interpersonal connections and foster a sense of shared humanity, which are central aspects of spiritual well-being. Individuals who demonstrate higher levels of compassion may develop stronger social bonds and derive meaning from acts of helping others. This aligns with prior research showing compassion's role in promoting well-being beyond healthcare contexts; for instance, compassionate care is considered a vital component of quality healthcare and has been linked to improved patient outcomes (Seppala et al., 2014). Even brief compassionate interactions from healthcare providers have been shown to reduce patient anxiety. Furthermore, practices like loving-kindness meditation can increase feelings of social connection while reducing self-focused attention, suggesting that such interventions may help cultivate compassionate attitudes toward others (Seppala et al., 2014).

Gratitude, Compassion, and Spiritual Well-being: Associations and Gender Differences among Young Adults

Consistent with the third hypothesis, gratitude and compassion were also significantly and positively related. This relationship may be understood through theoretical perspectives that view positive emotions as mutually reinforcing psychological resources. Gratitude increases awareness of benefits received from others, which may strengthen empathy and sensitivity toward others' needs (McCullough et al., 2002). According to the broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions (Fredrickson, 2001), positive emotional states expand individuals' cognitive and behavioural repertoires, enabling them to build enduring personal and social resources. Within this framework, gratitude may broaden individuals' awareness of supportive relationships and social interconnectedness, thereby fostering compassionate attitudes and behaviours toward others. Empirical reviews similarly indicate that gratitude is associated with increased prosocial behaviour and interpersonal sensitivity (Wood et al., 2010).

Gender comparisons revealed that females reported significantly higher levels of gratitude and compassion compared to males. These findings are consistent with prior research suggesting that women tend to report greater emotional expressiveness, empathy, and relational orientation than men (Chaplin & Aldao, 2013). Socialization processes may play an important role in shaping these patterns, as females are often encouraged to express care, empathy, and appreciation within interpersonal relationships. Such socialization patterns may therefore contribute to higher levels of gratitude and compassion among females. However, no significant gender difference was found in spiritual well-being. Although females reported slightly higher mean scores, the difference was not statistically significant, suggesting that spiritual well-being may be influenced by broader existential factors such as meaning, purpose, and personal values that operate relatively independently of gender (Fisher, 2011).

These findings support the broader framework of positive psychology, which emphasizes the role of positive emotions and character strengths in promoting psychological flourishing (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000; Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Gratitude and compassion may function as interconnected psychological strengths that contribute to individuals' sense of meaning, connectedness, and spiritual fulfillment. During young adulthood—a developmental stage characterized by identity exploration and the search for life purpose (Arnett, 2000)—these strengths may play an important role in supporting adaptive functioning and overall well-being.

While this study provides valuable insights, it has some limitations. First, the cross-sectional correlational design limits the ability to infer causality or determine the temporal order among gratitude, compassion, and spiritual well-being. While significant positive associations were observed, it remains unclear whether one construct influences the other, or if external, unmeasured factors play a role. Second, the reliance on self-report measures introduces potential biases, including social desirability and common method variance. Participants may have provided responses they perceived as socially acceptable or displayed consistent response patterns across measures, which could inflate the observed relationships. Finally, the sample was restricted to young adults, limiting the generalizability of the findings to other age groups or cultural contexts.

Future research could adopt longitudinal or experimental designs to clarify causal relationships among gratitude, compassion, and spiritual well-being. Using multi-method assessments, such as behavioural observations or peer reports, may reduce self-report bias.

Gratitude, Compassion, and Spiritual Well-being: Associations and Gender Differences among Young Adults

Expanding samples to diverse age groups and cultural backgrounds would improve generalizability, while exploring potential mediators or moderators could reveal mechanisms linking these positive traits to spiritual flourishing.

Overall, the present findings highlight significant positive associations among gratitude, compassion, and spiritual well-being among young adults, with females demonstrating notably higher levels of gratitude and compassion despite comparable spiritual well-being across genders.

CONCLUSION

The present study examined relationships among gratitude, compassion, and spiritual well-being among 140 young adults from northern India and found significant positive correlations ($r = .47-.54$, $p < .001$), suggesting that these qualities function as interrelated psychological strengths during this formative life stage. Females demonstrated significantly higher levels of gratitude and compassion than males, though no significant gender difference emerged for spiritual well-being ($p = .092$). These findings extend positive psychology frameworks by showing how gratitude and compassion together support spiritual health in emerging adults. They also emphasize the practicality of using these interventions in educational and counselling settings. Although the cross-sectional design limits causal conclusions, it encourages longitudinal studies and multi-method approaches to validate these results. Overall, nurturing these interconnected virtues appears promising for enhancing well-being trajectories among young adults navigating emerging adulthood.

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Gratitude, Compassion, and Spiritual Well-being: Associations and Gender Differences among Young Adults

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Gratitude, Compassion, and Spiritual Well-being: Associations and Gender Differences among Young Adults

Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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