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Short Report
Independence From Elders, Gratitude, and Pleasure in Uniqueness: Hedonic and Eudaimonic Wellbeing Among Emirati University Students

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Abstract: Autonomy is often assumed to support wellbeing. In Gulf Arab societies, where family interdependence is central, independence from elders may carry relational costs. This short report examined how gratitude, pleasure in uniqueness, and autonomy from elder influence (decisional independence) relate to life satisfaction, flourishing, and positive and negative affect among university students in the United Arab Emirates. Gratitude was the most consistent correlate of all four outcomes. Pleasure in uniqueness was uniquely associated with flourishing, but not with life satisfaction or affect. Autonomy from elder influence was unrelated to wellbeing at the bivariate level; once gratitude was controlled, it was negatively associated with life satisfaction, but not with flourishing. Because autonomy was also positively associated with gratitude, a positive indirect association with wellbeing appeared alongside a negative direct association with life satisfaction, a pattern of statistical suppression. In sum, independence from elders is not linked to wellbeing in the way that individualist models predict, and gratitude may be one route by which young Emiratis combine personal agency with family connection.

يُفترض في الغالب أن الاستقلالية تدعم الرفاه. غير أن الاستقلال عن كبار الأسرة في المجتمعات العربية الخليجية، حيث يحتل الترابط الأسري مكانة محورية، قد ينطوي على كلفة على صعيد العلاقات. تناول هذا التقرير الموجز علاقة الامتنان، والاستمتاع بالتفرّد، والاستقلالية عن تأثير كبار الأسرة (الاستقلالية في اتخاذ القرار) بكلٍّ من الرضا عن الحياة، والازدهار النفسي، والوجدان الإيجابي والسلبي، لدى طلبة جامعيين في دولة الإمارات العربية المتحدة. وكان الامتنان أكثر المتغيرات اتساقًا في ارتباطه بالمخرجات الأربعة جميعها. وارتبط الاستمتاع بالتفرّد ارتباطًا فريدًا بالازدهار النفسي، دون أن يرتبط بالرضا عن الحياة أو بالوجدان. ولم ترتبط الاستقلالية عن تأثير كبار الأسرة بالرفاه على مستوى الارتباط الثنائي؛ إلا أنها، بعد ضبط متغير الامتنان، ارتبطت ارتباطًا سلبيًا بالرضا عن الحياة، دون أن ترتبط بالازدهار النفسي. ونظرًا إلى أن الاستقلالية ارتبطت كذلك ارتباطًا إيجابيًا بالامتنان، فقد ظهر ارتباط غير مباشر إيجابي بالرفاه إلى جانب ارتباط مباشر سلبي بالرضا عن الحياة، وهو نمط يُعرف بالكبت الإحصائي. وخلاصة القول، إن الاستقلال عن كبار الأسرة لا يرتبط بالرفاه على النحو الذي تتنبأ به النماذج الفردانية، وقد يكون الامتنان أحد السبل التي يجمع من خلالها الشباب الإماراتي بين الفاعلية الشخصية والترابط الأسري.

Keywords: gratitude; uniqueness; autonomy; subjective wellbeing; flourishing; United Arab Emirates

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The United Arab Emirates (UAE) has changed rapidly in two generations. Higher education has expanded, particularly for Emirati women, English is widely used as a medium of instruction, and young people are exposed to global media, alongside Islamic and family traditions that remain central to daily life. Qualitative work describes Emirati families negotiating these changes across generations, especially in the roles and expectations of young women (Crabtree, 2007). Arab families are generally characterised by high connectedness and parental authority (Dwairy et al., 2006), yet young adults in the region increasingly encounter ideals of personal choice and self-expression. How these ideals relate to wellbeing is an open question for positive psychology in the Gulf.

Research on wellbeing in Arab populations has grown over the past two decades. Self-esteem, optimism, and positive affect predict wellbeing among Lebanese students (Ayyash-Abdo & Alamuddin, 2007), religiosity is associated with happiness in Egypt and Kuwait (Abdel-Khalek, 2012), and positive psychology interventions appear effective in Arab countries (Basurrah et al., 2023; Lambert & Pasha-Zaidi, 2019). UAE students tend to construe happiness in relational terms, such as making parents proud or fulfilling religious duties (Lambert D'raven & Pasha-Zaidi, 2015), and some hold beliefs that happiness is fragile or should be feared (Joshanloo & Weijers, 2014; Lambert et al., 2019, 2022). Less is known about how personal orientations that are often labelled individualistic, such as autonomy and the wish to be distinct, relate to wellbeing in this setting. This short report examines two such orientations, autonomy from elder influence and pleasure in uniqueness, alongside gratitude, a strength that is both well established in the wellbeing literature and closely tied to Islamic and family values.

Autonomy: Independence or Volition?

Individualist accounts predict that greater autonomy brings greater wellbeing, while cultural fit accounts predict that wellbeing in collectivist contexts rests more on relational harmony than on personal autonomy (Lu & Gilmour, 2004; Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Part of this disagreement is a matter of definition. Self-determination theory defines autonomy as volition, that is, acting from self-endorsed motives, rather than as independence from others (Deci & Ryan, 2000). In a four-nation study, the relative autonomy with which people enacted cultural practices predicted wellbeing in South Korea, Russia, Turkey, and the United States, whether those practices were individualist or collectivist in content (Chirkov et al., 2003). Developmental research makes the same distinction. Adolescents' perceptions that parents promote volitional functioning predicted adjustment better than perceptions that parents promote independence (Soenens et al., 2007), and decisional independence by itself showed weak associations with adjustment compared with the motives behind decisions (Van Petegem et al., 2012), a pattern also observed among Chinese adolescents (Chen et al., 2013). Kağıtçıbaşı (2005) argued that agency and relatedness are compatible and described an "autonomous-related" self that is common in societies undergoing urbanisation and economic development, in which young people gain agency without separating from the family.

Cultural fit also matters. Personality traits relate more strongly to wellbeing when they match the prevailing norms of a society (Fulmer et al., 2010), and among Arab adolescents, authoritarian

parenting was not linked to poorer mental health in the way reported in Western samples, whereas inconsistency between parenting and culture was (Dwairy et al., 2006). The measure used in the present study, autonomy from elder influence, captures decisional independence: making important life decisions without deferring to elders. Accordingly, there is no compelling reason to expect this form of autonomy to be positively associated with wellbeing among Emirati students, and it may carry a cost to life evaluations if family approval is part of how a good life is judged.

Pleasure in Uniqueness

Individuals are motivated to see themselves as distinct from others (Snyder & Fromkin, 1980). Need for uniqueness has been linked with anti-conformity and self-expression (Snyder & Fromkin, 1977); it is also assumed to be weaker in collectivist cultures, where conformity carries connotations of harmony rather than weakness (Kim & Markus, 1999). Yet, in a study of 21 cultural groups, the motive for distinctiveness was not weaker in more collectivist nations; culture shaped how distinctiveness was achieved, with difference and separateness more important in individualist settings and social position more important in collectivist settings (Becker et al., 2012; Vignoles, 2009). Enjoying one's distinct qualities may thus be separable from publicly defying norms. A personal sense of uniqueness has been associated with subjective wellbeing (Demir et al., 2013, 2019), but which component of wellbeing it supports has not been examined. Because distinctiveness implicates identity, competence, and purpose, it may relate more to eudaimonic wellbeing (meaning, growth) than to hedonic wellbeing (pleasant affect and life satisfaction; Ryan & Deci, 2001; Ryff, 1989).

Gratitude

Gratitude, the tendency to recognise and respond with grateful emotion to the benevolence of others (McCullough et al., 2002), is one of the most consistent correlates of subjective wellbeing (Emmons & McCullough, 2003; Wood et al., 2010; see Dickens, 2017, for intervention effects). In Islam, gratitude (*shukr*) is a central virtue. Among Muslim students in Iran, both religious and general gratitude were associated with higher wellbeing (Aghababaei & Tabik, 2013), and an Islamic-based gratitude exercise increased happiness among Muslim students in Malaysia (Al-Seheel & Noor, 2016). At the same time, gratitude-letter interventions appear less effective in collectivist samples, possibly because expressing gratitude also evokes indebtedness (Layous et al., 2013; Shin et al., 2020), and gratitude in collectivist contexts is often expressed through reciprocal action rather than words (Naito et al., 2005). Measures and interventions in the Gulf may need to include local forms of gratitude, such as thanking God and giving to charity.

Gratitude is also relational: it directs attention to what others have provided, making it a plausible link between personal orientations and wellbeing in a family-centred culture. A young adult who makes more of their own decisions may recognise the support and opportunities their family has provided, and gratitude may help keep relational ties intact while agency grows (Kağıtçıbaşı, 2005). Positive emotions like gratitude are also thought to build psychological and social resources over time (Fredrickson, 2001). Thus, gratitude was examined as a predictor and possible intervening variable, recognising that cross-sectional data cannot establish the order of effects.

The Present Study

This exploratory study examined gratitude, pleasure in uniqueness, and autonomy from elder influence in relation to four components of wellbeing among Emirati university students: life satisfaction, flourishing, positive affect, and negative affect. Three questions guided the analyses. First, is gratitude associated with all four components, as prior research would predict? Second, is pleasure in uniqueness more closely associated with eudaimonic wellbeing (flourishing) than with hedonic wellbeing (life satisfaction and affect)? Third, how is autonomy from elder influence associated with wellbeing, both directly and indirectly through gratitude? No direction was predicted for the third question.

Participants and Procedure

Participants were 149 students at a federal university in the UAE (87.9% female, reflecting the student body; 96.6% undergraduate). Most (88.6%) were aged 19 to 28 years; 7.4% were 18 years, and 4.0% were older than 28. Self-reported socioeconomic status was lower (1.3%), lower middle (30.9%), upper middle (56.4%), or upper class (11.4%). Nearly all participants (98.7%) were Emirati nationals; two were Arab expatriate students.

Data were collected through an online survey (Google Forms) between April 2023 and October 2024. A convenience sample was drawn from the author's classes and department; departmental coordinators distributed the link by email. To ensure voluntariness, the informed consent form explicitly stated that participation was entirely voluntary, anonymous and that students could withdraw at any time without penalty. Of nearly 200 students invited, 149 responded (74.5%). Participants gave informed consent, completed demographic items and the measures below, receiving no compensation. Measures were administered in English, the language of instruction. The study was approved by the author's institutional ethics committee (#ZU22_108_F).

Measures

Life satisfaction was measured with the five-item *Satisfaction with Life Scale* (Diener et al., 1985; 1 to 7 scale; $\alpha = .91$). Flourishing was measured with the eight-item *Flourishing Scale* (Diener et al., 2010; 1 to 7 scale; $\alpha = .92$). Positive and negative affect over the past four weeks were measured with the *Scale of Positive and Negative Experience* (Diener et al., 2010; six items each, 1 to 5 scale; $\alpha = .87$ and .83).

Three measures were developed and/or adapted for this study and refined using item analyses in the present sample. *Gratitude* was assessed with 16 items drawn from the Gratitude Questionnaire-6 (McCullough et al., 2002) and from expressions of gratitude common in the Gulf, including verbal and action-based expression, gratitude to God (e.g., "I always remember to say thank you to God for all the blessings I have"), and gratitude through charity (1 to 7 scale). Three items were removed (one duplicate and two with negative or near-zero item-total correlations), leaving 13 items ($\alpha = .81$, $\omega = .82$). *Pleasure in uniqueness* was assessed with items adapted from the Need for Uniqueness Scale (Snyder & Fromkin, 1977). The full seven-item scale was unreliable ($\alpha = .54$); the four items on expressing opinions and resisting conformity had item-total correlations below .15, whereas the three items on enjoying being different formed a reliable scale ($\alpha = .79$, $\omega =$

.81) and were retained. *Autonomy from elder influence* was drawn from a six-item scale on independent versus deferent decision making (1 to 6 scale). The full scale was unreliable (α = .44); exploratory factor analysis (principal axis factoring, oblimin rotation) yielded two factors, of which only the first, three items on deferring to elders in important decisions (3, 4, 5 e.g., "In many areas of my life, I let my elders or important others influence decisions regarding me," reverse-scored), was usable (α = .62, ω = .66). Higher scores indicate greater autonomy. On the second factor, positively worded personal independence items (1, 2; loadings = .78 and .86) loaded opposite to reverse-scored cultural conformity (6R; loading = −.50). Removing 6R yielded a clean two-item subscale labelled Independent Decision-Making (r = .51, Spearman-Brown = .67, α = .67). But only factor 1 subscale were retained, with higher scores indicating greater autonomy from elder influence (3,4,5 items). As these scales were refined on the same data used to test the research questions, results involving them should be treated as exploratory. All three scales are in the Appendix.

Analysis

Analyses were conducted in SPSS 31 and jamovi 2.5. After screening (skewness and kurtosis within ±1; all variance inflation factors below 1.3; fewer than 4% of cases missing on any scale, handled by listwise deletion, analytic N = 143 to 146), we computed bivariate correlations, then four multiple regressions in which each wellbeing outcome was regressed simultaneously on the three predictors. Finally, four simple mediation models tested indirect associations of autonomy and of pleasure in uniqueness with life satisfaction and flourishing through gratitude, using bias-corrected bootstrap confidence intervals (5,000 resamples; medmod module, Gallucci, 2019). Because the data are cross-sectional, indirect effects are interpreted as statistical associations rather than causal processes (Maxwell & Cole, 2007).

Results

Descriptive Statistics and Correlations

Descriptive statistics and correlations are presented in Tables 1 and 2. Participants reported moderate to high wellbeing: life satisfaction (M = 23.32, SD = 7.27, range 5 to 35), flourishing (M = 40.08, SD = 9.43, range 8 to 56), positive affect (M = 20.79, SD = 4.70), and negative affect (M = 16.89, SD = 4.58; both ranges 6 to 30). Autonomy from elder influence was near the scale midpoint (M = 10.72, SD = 3.12on a 1 to 6 scale,), with the full range observed.

Gratitude was correlated with life satisfaction (r = .44), flourishing (r = .67), positive affect (r = .47), and negative affect (r = −.35; all ps < .001). Pleasure in uniqueness was correlated with flourishing (r = .47, p < .001) and life satisfaction (r = .21, p = .009), but not with positive or negative affect. Autonomy from elder influence was not correlated with any wellbeing outcome (rs from −.14 to .12, all ps > .08) but was positively correlated with gratitude (r = .30, p < .001). Gratitude and pleasure in uniqueness were also correlated (r = .35, p < .001).

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics and Internal Consistency Coefficients for Study Variables

Variable	*k*	*M*	*SD*	α	Ω
1. Autonomy from Elder Influence	3	10.72	3.12	.62	.66
2. Gratitude	13	65.66	12.01	.81	.82
3. Pleasure in Uniqueness	3	13.64	3.77	.79	.81
4. Life Satisfaction (SWLS)	5	23.32	7.27	.91	.91
5. Flourishing	8	40.08	9.43	.92	.92
6. Positive Affect (SPANE-P)	6	20.79	4.70	.87	.87
7. Negative Affect (SPANE-N)	6	16.89	4.58	.83	.84

Note. N = 146–149. k = number of items in scale; α = Cronbach's alpha; ω = McDonald's omega.

Table 2

Bivariate Correlations Among Study Variables

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Autonomy from Elder Influence	—						
2. Gratitude	.30***	—					
3. Pleasure in Uniqueness	.04	.35***	—				
4. Life Satisfaction (SWLS)	−.14	.44***	.21**	—			
5. Flourishing	.12	.67***	.47***	.62***	—		
6. Positive Affect (SPANE-P)	.06	.47***	.12	.57***	.52***	—	
7. Negative Affect (SPANE-N)	−.07	−.35***	−.12	−.56***	−.40***	−.65***	—

Note. N = 143–149 (pairwise deletion). **p < .01. ***p < .001.

Regression Analyses

The three predictors together accounted for significant variance in each outcome (Table 3): life satisfaction, $R^2 = .28$, $F(3, 142) = 18.55$; flourishing, $R^2 = .52$, $F(3, 139) = 50.26$; positive affect, $R^2 = .23$, $F(3, 142) = 14.17$; and negative affect, $R^2 = .13$, $F(3, 142) = 6.85$ (all ps < .001). Gratitude was the strongest unique predictor of every outcome (life satisfaction β = .51; flourishing β = .60; positive affect β = .52; negative affect β = −.37; all ps < .001). Pleasure in uniqueness uniquely predicted flourishing (β = .28, $p < .001$) but not life satisfaction (β = .05), positive affect (β = −.06), or negative affect (β = .01). Autonomy from elder influence was a significant negative predictor of life satisfaction (β = −.30, $p < .001$) but did not predict flourishing (β = −.08, $p = .210$), positive affect, or negative affect. Because autonomy was unrelated to life satisfaction at the bivariate level, its negative coefficient in the regression indicates suppression: the variance autonomy shares with gratitude is positively related to life satisfaction, and once it is removed, the remaining variance in autonomy is negatively related to life satisfaction (MacKinnon et al., 2000).

Table 3

Multiple Regression Analyses Predicting Components of Subjective Wellbeing From Autonomy From Elder Influence, Gratitude, and Pleasure in Uniqueness

Predictor	Life Satisfaction *B* (*SE*)	Life Satisfaction β	Flourishing *B* (*SE*)	Flourishing β	Positive Affect *B* (*SE*)	Positive Affect β	Negative Affect *B* (*SE*)	Negative Affect β
Autonomy from Elder Influence	−0.68 (0.17)	−.30***	−0.23 (0.18)	−.08	−0.13 (0.11)	−.09	0.05 (0.12)	.04
Gratitude	0.31 (0.05)	.51***	0.47 (0.05)	.60***	0.20 (0.03)	.52***	−0.14 (0.03)	−.37***
Pleasure in Uniqueness	0.10 (0.15)	.05	0.70 (0.16)	.28***	−0.07 (0.10)	−.06	0.01 (0.10)	.01
R^2	.28		.52		.23		.13	
Adjusted R^2	.27		.51		.21		.11	
F	18.55***		50.26***		14.17***		6.85***	
Df	3, 142		3, 139		3, 142		3, 142	

Note. *B* = unstandardized regression coefficient; *SE* = standard error; β = standardized regression coefficient.
***$p < .001$.

Indirect Associations Through Gratitude

Indirect associations through gratitude were positive and significant in all four models (Table 4). For autonomy and life satisfaction, the indirect association was positive (B = 0.36, 95% CI [0.13, 0.60]) while the direct association was negative (B = −0.69, 95% CI [−1.03, −0.31]), so the total association was not significant (B = −0.33, p = .077). For autonomy and flourishing, the indirect association was significant (B = 0.60, 95% CI [0.26, 1.03]), but neither the direct (B = −0.28, p = .248) nor the total association (B = 0.32, p = .188) was. For pleasure in uniqueness and life satisfaction, the indirect association was significant (B = 0.28, 95% CI [0.13, 0.45]) and the direct association was not (B = 0.14, p = .423). For pleasure in uniqueness and flourishing, both the indirect (B = 0.48, 95% CI [0.26, 0.73]) and direct (B = 0.71, 95% CI [0.33, 1.07]) associations were significant; about 40% of the total association ran through gratitude.

Table 4

Indirect, Direct, and Total Associations of Autonomy From Elder Influence and Pleasure in Uniqueness With Wellbeing Through Gratitude

Predictor	Outcome	Indirect Effect B [95% CI], p	Direct Effect B [95% CI], p	Total Effect B [95% CI], p
Autonomy from Elder Influence	Life Satisfaction	0.36 [0.13, 0.60], <.001	−0.69 [−1.03, −0.31], <.001	−0.33 [−0.69, 0.05], .077
Autonomy from Elder Influence	Flourishing	0.60 [0.26, 1.03], .002	−0.28 [−0.76, 0.20], .248	0.32 [−0.16, 0.81], .188
Pleasure in Uniqueness	Life Satisfaction	0.28 [0.13, 0.45], <.001	0.14 [−0.19, 0.48], .423	0.42 [0.10, 0.71], .007
Pleasure in Uniqueness	Flourishing	0.48 [0.26, 0.73], <.001	0.71 [0.33, 1.07], <.001	1.19 [0.80, 1.57], <.001

Note. N = 143–146. Estimates are unstandardized regression coefficients (B) from bootstrap mediation analyses with gratitude as the mediator. CI = bias-corrected percentile bootstrap confidence interval (5,000 resamples). Indirect effects are statistically significant when the 95% CI excludes zero.

Structure of the Gratitude Measure

A supplementary exploratory factor analysis of the 13 gratitude items (principal axis factoring, oblimin rotation; KMO = .80; Bartlett's $\chi^2(78) = 608.56$, $p < .001$) yielded three factors explaining 57.5% of the variance: a general factor combining dispositional, verbal, and religious gratitude (five items, $\alpha = .77$); a factor made up of the reverse-coded items, interpreted as a wording effect (five items, $\alpha = .76$; DiStefano & Motl, 2006; Marsh, 1996); and a behavioural factor reflecting gratitude through gifts, reciprocal giving, and charity (three items, $\alpha = .73$). The third factor is

consistent with accounts of gratitude in collectivist contexts as expressed through reciprocal action (Lee & Kim, 2023; Naito et al., 2005). The composite score was used in all main analyses.

Discussion

This short report examined three personal orientations in relation to hedonic and eudaimonic wellbeing among Emirati university students. Three findings stand out. Gratitude was the most consistent correlate of all four wellbeing components. Pleasure in uniqueness was associated with flourishing but not with life satisfaction or affect. Autonomy from elder influence was unrelated to wellbeing overall, but once its shared variance with gratitude was removed, it was associated with lower life satisfaction, though not with lower flourishing.

Gratitude. The strength and consistency of gratitude's associations ($|\beta|$ = .37 to .60) extend a well-replicated finding (Emmons & McCullough, 2003; Wood et al., 2010) to Emirati students, a group rarely represented in this literature. Two features of the result are relevant to the region. First, the measure included gratitude to God and gratitude through charity, and the factor analysis separated a behavioural, giving-based form of gratitude from verbal and dispositional gratitude. This supports calls to measure gratitude in ways that reflect how it is practised locally rather than relying only on Western instruments (Naito et al., 2005; Shin et al., 2020). Second, gratitude's strongest association was with flourishing (r = .67). Some of this may reflect overlap in content between the two measures, but it also suggests that, for these students, gratitude is tied to a sense of meaning and good relationships, not only to pleasant feelings.

Pleasure in uniqueness. Uniquely associated with flourishing (β = .28) and not with hedonic outcomes, pleasure in uniqueness emerged consistently with the view that distinctiveness concerns identity, purpose, and competence (Ryan & Deci, 2001; Ryff, 1989). The psychometric results are also informative. Items about resisting conformity and voicing unpopular opinions did not cohere with items about enjoying being different. This fits the cross-cultural evidence that the motive to be distinct is not weaker in collectivist societies but is achieved in different ways (Becker et al., 2012; Vignoles, 2009). For Emirati students, enjoying one's own qualities appears to be compatible with collective values, whereas defying norms may not be. Gratitude accounted for about 40% of uniqueness's association with flourishing; the remainder may reflect other processes, such as a more coherent sense of self or authenticity (Schlegel et al., 2009).

Autonomy from Elder Influence. The autonomy findings are the main contribution of this report. Autonomy from elder influence, a measure of decisional independence, was not associated with wellbeing at the bivariate level. Two opposing associations appeared once gratitude was taken into account: students who made more of their own decisions also reported more gratitude, which was linked to higher wellbeing; independent of gratitude, greater decisional independence was linked to lower life satisfaction. This pattern contradicts the simple individualist expectation that independence supports wellbeing, but it is consistent with research that distinguishes independence from volition. Self-determination theory locates the benefits of autonomy in self-endorsed functioning, not in independence from others (Chirkov et al., 2003), and decisional independence has shown weak or inconsistent associations with adjustment in several cultures (Chen et al., 2013; Soenens et al., 2007; Van Petegem et al., 2012).

That the negative direct association appeared for life satisfaction but not for flourishing is also meaningful. Life satisfaction is a global judgment of one's life against a standard. If, as earlier work suggests, UAE students judge a good life partly in terms of family approval (Lambert D'raven & Pasha-Zaidi, 2015), then deciding without elders may lower that judgment via intergenerational tension or reduced belonging, consistent with cultural fit accounts (Dwairy et al., 2006; Fulmer et al., 2010). Flourishing, which concerns purpose, competence, and relationships, did not show this cost. The positive association between autonomy and gratitude fits Kağıtçıbaşı's (2005) autonomous-related self: students who are more independent in their decisions may also be more aware of what their families have given them. Gratitude may be a way young Emiratis maintain connectedness while exercising agency.

These interpretations should be held tentatively. Suppression effects can be unstable in small samples, the autonomy scale had three items and modest reliability ($\alpha = .62$), and the cross-sectional design cannot rule out other orderings. For example, students who are less satisfied with their lives may be more likely to make decisions independently, and grateful students may feel more trusted to decide for themselves. The ordering tested here is one of several that fit the data (MacKinnon et al., 2000; Maxwell & Cole, 2007).

Implications

With these limits in mind, the findings offer modest guidance for student wellbeing programmes in the Gulf. Gratitude practices appear well suited to this population, particularly forms that reflect local practice, such as gratitude to God and charitable giving, rather than relying only on gratitude letters, which may evoke indebtedness (Layous et al., 2013; Shin et al., 2020). Activities that help students recognise and use their distinct strengths may support flourishing. Programmes that promote autonomy should frame it as acting from one's own values within relationships, not as separation from family; the present results suggest that independence framed as distance from elders may not improve, and may lower, how students evaluate their lives.

Limitations and Future Directions

The sample was small, drawn from one university, mostly female, and recruited partly from the author's classes, which limits generalisability and may have increased socially desirable responding. All measures were self-report and administered in English rather than Arabic. Three scales were developed or shortened using the same data, and the autonomy measure assessed decisional independence only, not the motives behind decisions. Future studies should use validated measures that separate independence from volitional functioning (e.g., Soenens et al., 2007; Van Petegem et al., 2012) in Arabic, include male students and other Gulf countries, test whether the suppression pattern replicates, and use longitudinal designs to examine the order of effects. Examining the behavioural and verbal forms of gratitude separately would also show which forms matter most for which components of wellbeing.

Conclusion

Among Emirati university students, gratitude was the most consistent correlate of wellbeing, pleasure in uniqueness was linked specifically to flourishing, and independence from elders showed

no simple positive association with wellbeing. Instead, decisional independence was associated with greater gratitude on the one hand and, beyond gratitude, with lower life satisfaction on the other. For positive psychology in the Gulf, the results suggest that autonomy should be studied and promoted as self-endorsed agency within family relationships rather than independence from them.

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Appendix: Retained Study Measures

1. Culturally Adapted Gratitude Scale (13 Retained Items)

Response scale: 1 = Strongly Disagree to 7 = Strongly Agree

1. It is difficult for me to say thanks to my close friends and relatives. (R)
2. If I had to list everything that I felt grateful for, it would be a long list.
3. When I look at the world, I do not see much to be grateful for. (R)
4. I use more meaningful actions to express gratitude towards others.
5. As I get older, I find myself more able to appreciate the people, events, and situations that have been part of my life history.
6. I find that I take a long time before I feel how grateful I should be to that person or something. (R)
7. When I feel grateful, I often try to express the same by buying a gift or doing something for the other person (like something I would want or buy for myself).
8. I show my gratefulness by giving something to the person who helped me in my need—could be time, help, or money that is important for the other person.
9. I always remember to say thank you to God for all the blessings I have.
10. Sometimes I find it easy to express gratitude towards others through a meaningful set of words (which may not be the exact "thank you" word in English).
11. Being grateful for people and things around me is not something that I do often. (R)
12. I think I do not need to express my gratitude by saying thanks to my close friends and relatives more often. (R)
13. I express gratitude towards the things I have in my life by giving donations or charity.

Note. Items are renumbered sequentially from the initial 16-item pool (original Items 3, 9, and 15 were removed; (**α** = .81, **ω** = .82). (R) indicates reverse-scored items. Subscale groupings: General Gratitude (Items 2, 4, 5, 9, 10), Reverse-Coded Wording Factor (Items 1, 3, 6, 11, 12), and Behavioral/Reciprocal Actions of Gratitude (Items 7, 8, 13).

2. Autonomy from Elder Influence Scale (3 Retained Items)

Response scale: 1 = Strongly Disagree to 6 = Strongly Agree

1. I don't know whether I can exercise freedom to take important decisions regarding my life. (R)
2. In certain areas of my life, I do let my elders or important others influence decisions regarding me (e.g., marriage, education, travel, friends, clothes, dressing). (R)
3. In many areas of my life, I do let my elders or important others influence decisions regarding me (e.g., marriage, education, travel, friends, clothes, dressing). (R)

Note. Items are renumbered sequentially from the initial 6-item pool (corresponding to original Items 3, 4, and 5; (**α** = .62, **ω** = .66). All three items are reverse-scored (R) so that higher scores reflect greater autonomy from elder influence.

3. Pleasure in Uniqueness Scale (3 Retained Items)

Response scale: 1 = Strongly Disagree to 7 = Strongly Agree

1. Feeling "different" in a crowd of people makes me feel happy and proud.
2. I would rather be known for always trying new ideas than for employing old ideas.
3. I often like to be very unique and different from others in actions, thinking, and appearance.

Note. Items are renumbered sequentially from the initial 7-item pool adapted from Snyder and Fromkin (1977) (corresponding to original Items 5, 6, and 7; (**α** = .79, **ω** = .81).