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Qualitative Article

Cultivating Gratitude through Intervention among Gay Working Men in Thailand: A Narrative Research

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Abstract

Background/Problem: Despite ongoing efforts and numerous studies aimed at enhancing inclusion for sexual and gender minorities (SGM), most research has focused primarily on mental health and discrimination issues among gay men. There remains a significant gap in studying the cultivation of gratitude within this group from a behavioral science perspective, particularly among working-age individuals.

Objective: This research examined the experience of gratitude cultivation among working-age gay men in Thailand through four gratitude interventions: (1) counting blessings, (2) gratitude visits, (3) three good things, and (4) mental subtraction.

Design and Methodology: This narrative qualitative study delved into the experiences of five Thai gay men of working age. Data collection involved in-depth interviews and diary recordings of their experiences. Thematic analysis was utilized for data interpretation.

Findings: The research findings were divided into two main themes, comprising gratitude cultivation experience and consecutive experience, which were further divided into two sub-themes, including gratitude towards oneself and gratitude towards others and the environment. The results indicated that the gratitude interventions positively impacted emotions, built personal resources, and developed interpersonal relationships. These effects continued at a two-week follow-up, suggesting lasting positive outcomes.

Conclusion and Implications: Gratitude intervention yields beneficial results, which can be used as a self-directed intervention for well-being enhancement within the sexual minority group. Future studies need some adjustments to be culturally appropriate within the Thai context.

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This research addresses the gap in studies on gratitude within sexual minorities by integrating theories such as the broaden-and-build theory, the find-remind-bind theory, and symbolic interactionism. It aims to promote well-being and reduce sexual inequality, aligning with the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of good health and well-being (SDG-3), as well as reduced inequality (SDG-10). By focusing on gratitude within this group, the research seeks to ensure equal access to well-being among working-age sexual minorities.

Since the depathologization of sexual and gender minorities (SGM), there has been a notable increase in psychological research focused on understanding various aspects of sexual orientation and gender diversity (Chan et al., 2022). Despite this growing body of research, SGM populations remain understudied, with insufficient representation in scholarly literature. Disparities and discrimination, particularly in workplace settings, persist and significantly impact the mental health and well-being of these groups. For

example, they face discrimination in hiring practices, are often forced to conform to gender identity norms in terms of dress code, and may experience obstacles in career advancement or promotion. They may even face termination due to their sexual orientation (Perales, 2022; United Nations Development Programme, 2019). Therefore, studies with SGM inclusion perspectives should investigate character strengths more extensively, including gratitude, to address work-related mental health issues (Antebi-Gruszka et al., 2021).

Positive psychology research has consistently highlighted the significant benefits of gratitude on well-being, positive emotions, and social relationships across diverse populations (Emmons & McCullough, 2003). Gratitude, a concept in positive psychology and a central focus of this study, is associated with increased happiness, improved mental health, and stronger interpersonal connections, making it a valuable area of study within positive psychology (Wood et al., 2010). This research is set in Thailand where Buddhism is the major religion practiced. The Thai concept of gratitude is deeply rooted in Buddhist traditions such as the principle of 38 blessings of life and the six *disa dhamma* (Pali term for the six doctrines in Buddhism), which represents the six relationships or duties one has in life. This significantly influences interpersonal dynamics and cultural values (Loem & Payago, 2019), including those experienced by gay men in Thailand. However, research specifically focused on the effects of gratitude among sexual minority populations is scarce. The existing literature primarily addresses general populations, leaving a gap in understanding how gratitude interventions might uniquely benefit sexual minorities, especially in the Thai context.

Gratitude interventions have been developed and studied for decades, with numerous studies demonstrating their efficacy in enhancing emotional well-being and social relationships (Diniz et al., 2023). Empirical evidence supports gratitude as one of the most important contributors to a good life (Watkins, 2014). While these studies are quantitative, as supported by systematic reviews and meta-analyses (Boggiss et al., 2020; Diniz et al., 2023) that provide robust data on the general benefits of gratitude, they often lack the deeper understanding that qualitative research can offer. This methodological imbalance underscores the need for more qualitative investigations to capture the rich, subjective experiences of gratitude among sexual minority populations.

This research aims to address the gap concerning a particular group and certain methodological limitations (Bernard et al., 2023; Boggiss et al., 2020; Diniz et al., 2023; Poncin et al., 2024) by focusing on working-age gay men in Thailand and employing qualitative methods, particularly narrative research. By integrating narrative approaches, this study seeks to provide a deeper understanding of how gratitude is cultivated and how interventions can impact well-being and social interaction. Additionally, it aims to explore the cultural and contextual factors that influence the cultivation of gratitude, thereby contributing to more inclusive and comprehensive positive psychology research (Rich, 2017) by applying four gratitude interventions—counting blessings, gratitude visits, three good things, and mental subtraction.

Literature Review

This section begins with the theoretical background, followed by the research concept and definition, and finally the research objective.

Theoretical Background

This section explains several theoretical perspectives relevant to sexual and gender diversity and gratitude, including the concepts of the broaden-and-build theory, find-remind-bind theory, symbolic interactionism, and gratitude interventions.

Sexual and Gender Diversity

From the 18th to the mid-19th centuries, the scientific paradigm introduced a turning point in sex education. Academic studies enabled the measurement and diagnosis of sexuality, reflecting the

functionalism of reproduction and categorizing differences between normal and abnormal (Duangwises, 2019). The 1971 conference of the American Psychiatric Association marked a pivotal moment in challenging these pathological views, leading to greater recognition of the impacts of binary gender norms on SGM individuals. Yet, psychological perspectives on gender diversity have concentrated on the pathology of non-heteronormative identities, resulting in the marginalization of sexual and gender minorities (SGM) who are left out of the binary system, impacting their personal and professional lives (Hajo et al., 2024; United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], 2019; UNDP & United States Agency for International Development [USAID], 2014).

Broaden-and-build Theory

The broaden-and-build theory, developed by Fredrickson (2004), posits that positive emotions broaden an individual's thought-action repertoire, encouraging more varied and open-minded thinking. This broadening effect leads individuals to explore new ideas and actions, which in turn helps build enduring personal resources such as social connections, skills, knowledge, and psychological resilience. These accumulated resources contribute to overall well-being and better coping strategies in the face of challenges (Fredrickson, 2004; Fredrickson & Joiner, 2018).

Given that gratitude is a positive emotion, the broaden-and-build theory explains the connection between the emergence of positive emotions and the enhancement of personal and social resources. This research employs the broaden-and-build theory to explain how gratitude interventions can lead to enhanced self-esteem, improved relationships with others, and increased social skills among participants in the intervention.

A study by Kaniuka et al. (2020) examined the broaden-and-build theory as one of the potential mechanisms explaining the benefits of gratitude relating to suicidal ideation, mediated by fewer depressive symptoms, less anticipated discrimination, greater self-compassion, and psychological enrichment among sexual minority people. The research also suggested additional studies on theoretical mechanisms as they are currently understudied.

Find-remind-bind

Gratitude has beneficial effects on interpersonal relationships between the giver (benefactor), who furnishes gifts or positive outcomes, and the receiver (beneficiary), who obtains those outcomes, from small groups to organizational and social levels (Tsang & Martin, 2019). The find-remind-bind theory highlights the social dynamics and exchanges that reinforce relationships. The theory suggests that gratitude helps individuals recognize and remember the importance of their relationships, thereby strengthening social bonds and promoting sustained social support (Algoe & Stanton, 2012; Cazzell et al., 2023). The theoretical structure can explain gratitude's positive effects relating to prosocial behavior, self-disclosure, predicted outcome values, and social worth among participants in gratitude intervention (Imai, 2022).

Symbolic Interactionism Theory

Symbolic interactionism is a sociological theory that focuses on how individuals interpret and create meaning through their interactions with others and society. It suggests that people develop their sense of self and identity through social interactions and the symbols they attach to those interactions (Alver & Caglar, 2015; Choorat & Sakunpong, 2022).

In the context of gratitude cultivation, symbolic interactionism can be applied to understand how individuals perceive and experience gratitude through their interactions with others. Gratitude interventions, especially gratitude visits, involve social interactions where individuals acknowledge and appreciate the kindness or support, they receive from others. Through these interactions, individuals may develop a deeper understanding of gratitude as a social construct and its significance in their relationships and well-being. Symbolic interactionism helps explain how gratitude is constructed, experienced, and

reinforced through interpersonal communication and social interactions within the framework of this theory.

Research Concepts

The key research concept of this study are gratitude and gratitude interventions.

Gratitude

Gratitude is recognized as one of the 24-character strengths in the values in action classification of character strengths and virtues (Seligman et al., 2005). It is characterized by thankfulness and happiness in response to receiving benefits, gifts, or blessings from others. Gratitude involves recognizing that these positive outcomes are due to the altruism of others (Emmons & McCullough, 2003). It is closely linked to emotional qualities, attitudes, virtues, morality, behavior, adaptive coping, and interpersonal relationships (Chen, 2017; Diniz et al., 2023). Gratitude fosters resilience by helping individuals find meaning and appreciation in their lives, even during challenging times (van Cappellen et al., 2018). Furthermore, meta-analyses have confirmed that gratitude interventions improve various aspects of well-being, including physical health, psychological health, and interpersonal relationships (Boggiss et al., 2020; Diniz et al., 2023).

Gratitude Interventions

Gratitude interventions have been developed in various forms of activities to foster greater, longer-lasting gratitude and positive emotions. Several activities are self-practiced, with empirical evidence supporting positive effects, positive experiences, and enhanced well-being among various groups of participants (Allen, 2018; Fredrickson, 2004).

Sexual and gender minorities tend to face stigma and oppression in social interactions (Duangwises, 2019). The study of positive psychology interventions among SGM, emphasizing the recognition and celebration of their strengths, provides benefits to their well-being. However, the literature in this area is limited and should be encouraged. Further study would not only provide useful insights to promote SGM well-being but also help to depathologize and serve as advocacy for these groups.

The study of gratitude interventions and gratitude, one of the main character strengths in positive psychology, would shed light on SGM groups and increase academic resources. Additionally, practitioners could enhance their skills and strengthen their approach by incorporating positive psychology into their practice to develop the professional implementation of psychology (Lytle et al., 2014). In this study, four self-directed gratitude interventions were conducted. All have been studied previously, providing empirical evidence of positive effects on participants. The details of each intervention are explained further.

(1) Counting blessings - The first activity to foster gratitude was counting blessings (Emmons & McCullough, 2003). Participants were asked to write down a few things for which they are grateful on a daily or weekly basis. Initial studies were conducted using three methods. In Studies 1 and 2, subjects were randomly placed into one of three groups. Each group recorded events with varying topics: hardship, common or social comparisons, and gratitude. The groups in Study 1 recorded weekly, while those in Study 2 recorded daily. The results showed that the gratitude group had the highest positive mood among all three studies (Emmons & McCullough, 2003).

(2) Gratitude visit - The gratitude visit involved writing a letter of gratitude to someone who had shown kindness but to whom the participants had no previous opportunity to express their appreciation. Participants were assigned to meet and deliver the letter. An initial study with 577 people (64% aged 35-54, 77% Caucasian) measured happiness and depression at baseline. Participants were divided into two groups, comprising those who wrote and delivered gratitude letters, and those who wrote three good things daily and their causes (TGT). Compared to other interventions and a placebo, the gratitude visit had longer-lasting effects, especially for those who practiced it for more than a week (Seligman et al., 2005).

(3) Three good things - As previously described, this intervention involved recording three good things daily. Participants were also asked to identify the causes that led to those good things. A previous study by Bahník et al. (2015) on the intervention effects, conducted by randomly asking 183 participants to write 1-10 good things per day for two weeks, found a decrease in negative emotions (Bahník et al., 2015). Another study involving 73 fatigued nurses who wrote three good things via social media platforms resulted in increased positive coping (Guo et al., 2020). A study combining gratitude visits and three good things for two weeks resulted in increased happiness and decreased depression. As shown in previous studies, this intervention offers numerous benefits, longer-lasting effects, and lower withdrawal rates.

(4) Mental subtraction - This intervention was based on the assumption that thinking about the absence of good things presently in their lives (absence of positive events) could induce a better mood than thinking about the presence of those things (presence of positive events). The initial study of mental subtraction was conducted with four methods (Koo et al., 2008). Method 1 involved a sample of students divided into four groups assigned to write about a situation relating to good things in their lives. Group 1 (absence condition) was assigned to write about situations in which good things might never have happened but surprisingly did. Group 2 (presence condition) participants simply wrote about how a positive situation happened. Both groups 3 and 4 recalled a situation they were grateful for and described it, but only group 4 could choose whether to write or just think about the situation. The results revealed that group 1 (absence condition) had more positive feelings than the other three groups (Koo et al., 2008).

From the literature review, it is evident that gratitude interventions are effective. However, a significant gap in knowledge remains, particularly in the in-depth study of the psychological experiences of those who participate in gratitude interventions from a behavioral science perspective. This gap is particularly evident among gay men, who constitute the target group of this study.

Research Objective

This research aimed to explore the experience of gratitude cultivation among working-age gay men in Thailand through the application of four specific gratitude interventions: (1) counting blessings, (2) gratitude visits, (3) three good things, and (4) mental subtraction.

Method

Research Design

This study aimed to examine the experience of gratitude cultivation through gratitude interventions among working-age Thai gay men. After each intervention was completed, participants provided detailed accounts of their experiences, with further details collected during a two-week follow-up. The study was conducted using narrative research, centering on the stories of individuals, exploring how they made sense of their experiences and the meanings they assigned to them. Additionally, it emphasized the temporal order of events, considering the chronology of the experiences being recounted. The researcher played a collaborative role, working closely with participants to co-construct the narratives. As a result, the study generated personal stories created by the participants themselves, where they assigned meaning to their experiences (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Riessman, 2008).

Setting

This study utilized in-depth interviews conducted both face-to-face and online, between September and October 2021. Initially, face-to-face interviews were conducted in private at convenient locations for participants, with audio recordings made using recording devices. As COVID-19 transmission rates increased, participants expressed concerns about the risk of infection when leaving their homes for interviews. Consequently, online interviews via Google Meet were adopted, with audio recordings made instead of face-to-face recordings.

Sampling Procedures

The researcher used purposive sampling through the snowball method, starting with a person known to the researcher who self-identifies as a working-age gay man. During the data collection phase, the

researcher was working as a psychologist in a province in southern Thailand and became acquainted with a hotel manager in the same province, who was the first participant. He then helped recommend friends who met the inclusion criteria to participate in the research project. Data were collected from a total of five participants, with two participants withdrawing due to personal commitments that prevented them from completing the activities. Nevertheless, the remaining three participants provided sufficient data for analysis, achieving data saturation.

Participants

The inclusion criteria for participants in this research were as follows: Individuals who identified themselves as gay men, aged between 19 and 60 years old, with more than one year of work experience. They were required to commit to the full program, including six interviews and four gratitude interventions, over a duration of five weeks between September and October 2021. Conversely, the exclusion criteria included individuals who met the aforementioned inclusion criteria but were unable to participate in all four gratitude intervention activities.

Interview Questions/ Tools

The study began with an interview to explore participants' backgrounds and their perspectives on their lives. After the first interview, participants started each intervention as listed below. Each interview was conducted shortly after each intervention to ascertain their experiences and how gratitude was cultivated. There was also a follow-up interview to explore the gratitude cultivation experience after all interventions were conducted, totaling six interviews. Each interview lasted around 30-45 minutes.

The interview steps can be explained in the following table:

Table 1
Steps and Descriptions for the Interviews and Interventions

Step	Activity	Description
1st Interview	Explore participants' backgrounds	Initial interview to gather information on participants' backgrounds and life perspectives.
1st Intervention	Counting Blessings	Participants write a minimum of 5 blessings they are grateful for daily for 13 days.
2nd Interview	Collect gratitude cultivation experience after counting Blessings	Interview conducted to gather experiences and reflections on the Counting Blessings intervention.
2nd Intervention	Gratitude Visit	Participants write a letter of gratitude to a person they are grateful for and read it to them.
3rd Interview	Collect gratitude cultivation experience after gratitude visit	Interview conducted to gather experiences and reflections on the gratitude visit intervention.
3rd Intervention	Three good things	Participants write 3 good things daily with explanations of the causes and their roles in those events for 7 days.
4th Interview	Collect gratitude cultivation experience after three good things	Interview conducted to gather experiences and reflections on the three good things intervention.
4th Intervention	Mental subtraction	Participants imagine a scenario where their loved ones might no longer be in their lives, then review their thoughts and emotions when realizing their loved ones are still present.
5th Interview	Collect gratitude cultivation experience after mental subtraction	Interview conducted to gather experiences and reflections on the Mental Subtraction intervention.
6th Interview	Collect gratitude cultivation experience after a two-week follow-up	Follow-up interview conducted to explore the lasting impact of all gratitude interventions on participants' gratitude cultivation experience.

Examples of in-depth interview questions regarding the experience of cultivating gratitude from the gratitude intervention include, (1) Can you describe your experiences during this activity? When did these thoughts and feelings occur during the activity process? (2) Did you notice or perceive any changes within yourself? If so, what were they? (3) How do you think this activity impacted your relationships with others?

Examples of in-depth interview questions regarding the experience of cultivating gratitude from the gratitude intervention after a two-week follow-up include: (1) Can you tell me about the changes that occurred in the two weeks following the completion of the activity? (2) How did these changes affect your life and your relationships with those around you?

The tools used for research data collection not only included interview questions but also incorporated recording devices for both face-to-face and online interviews, as well as fieldwork experience journals kept by the researcher to record experiences, thoughts, beliefs, and observations that may influence the interpretation and analysis of data emerging from the research field.

Data Analysis

Transcribed interviews from participants reflecting their interpretations of the gratitude cultivation experience were analyzed using the guidelines for thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019) in combination with inductive and deductive methods (Photisita, 2004). The deductive analysis predefined themes and sub-themes based on the sequence of interventions that participants would undergo. The inductive approach was used to elaborate on each sub-theme by analyzing participants' experiences. Data collected from interviews, note-taking, recordings, and journals were reviewed and coded, systematically grouping similar content under each category. The process involved interpreting and linking relationships to illustrate story development as well as summarizing findings to answer research questions and conclude the study.

Data Rigor

In this study, triangulation was employed to enhance the trustworthiness of the findings through data and method triangulation (Shenton, 2004). Data triangulation involved collecting perspectives from five participants with diverse backgrounds, while method triangulation utilized researcher note-taking, participant journaling of gratitude activities, and semi-structured interviews. These approaches ensured a comprehensive and credible analysis of the participants' experiences.

Investigator triangulation was used by involving multiple researchers, including experts in psychology and qualitative research, to validate the research process. Member checking with participants further confirmed the accuracy of the findings, strengthening the overall credibility and trustworthiness of the study (Shenton, 2004).

Results

Presenting the research findings begins with the background information of the participants. Following that, the presentation of data analysis results will be provided to address the research objectives. The data analysis results comprise two themes: 1) Gratitude cultivation experience from gratitude intervention, and 2) Consecutive experience.

Demographic Information

The research data were collected from five working-age gay men who were initially interviewed to collect their background information. To protect their privacy and confidentiality, letters and numbers were used to refer to the participants. Background information relating to participants is shown in Table 2.

Table 2*Background Information of the Participants*

	Participant 1	Participant 2	Participant 3	Participant 4	Participant 5
Pseudonym	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5
Age	27	38	35	34	34
Education	Vocational	Diploma	Bachelor	Bachelor	Bachelor
Profession	Business owner	Sales agent	Financial controller	Customer service manager	Division director
Income per month (THB)	6,000	20,000	38,000	20,000	100,000
Dating Partner	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes

Gratitude Cultivation Experience from Gratitude Intervention

Practicing the gratitude intervention enabled a gratitude cultivation experience, resulting in gratitude towards oneself as well as gratitude towards others and the environment. These themes are divided into sub-themes and categories listed according to the intervention plan and completion as follows.

Sub-theme 1: Counting Blessings

The counting blessings intervention was the first activity in which the participants reflected on their experiences and recorded five things for which they were grateful daily for 13 days.

The category of gratitude towards oneself revealed that counting blessings allowed participants to acknowledge their internal positive resources. With self-acknowledgement and recognition, they felt thankful for their personal qualities, which helped them cope with life situations and better interact with those around them.

“I secretly smiled to myself and was glad that I could deal with this heartache myself. Oh, and it's good that this problem is no longer a problem. It's like reviewing my responses daily. I realized that, wow, this problem has not really affected me. So, I thank myself for the ability to contain my emotions.” – P1

The category of gratitude towards others and surroundings explained participants' ability to notice qualities that were not previously recognized in their past experiences. Seeing their surroundings in a different light encouraged them to pay closer attention to others. They became more determined to take reciprocal action to return gestures of goodwill.

“Like during work, sometimes it reminded me to think more carefully, looking at things, things like going to cause issues or things which would cause unpleasant consequences to them. I would then, try not to do it.” – P3

Sub-theme 2: Gratitude Visit

The gratitude visit started with participants identifying one person they were grateful for but did not have the opportunity to thank properly. Participants wrote a letter addressing the selected recipient, covering (1) a past event for which the participant was grateful, (2) the positive outcome from the event, and (3) the participant's feelings relating to the positive outcomes. Then, participants read their letters to the recipients to complete the intervention.

The category of gratitude towards oneself revealed that, by revisiting past positive experiences and memories shared with the recipient, participants acknowledged not only their internal positive resources but also their significance to the recipients and other people. They realized their value and importance.

“She also thanked me ... thanking me for a lot of things I taught her, thanking me for brotherhood, sisterhood, that sort of things for the duration of 1 year we have been together. I then feel... feel happy and grateful as well. She said I was kind-hearted. I was generous. I always thought of other people.” – P5

The category of gratitude towards others and surroundings affirmed positive relationships. The values of the relationship and blessings shared with others were highlighted. Participants' gratitude towards significant people grew stronger.

"I feel... like I love her even more. Oh, I felt like, after I wrote and composed it, I felt like, um, what do you call it? It's like, like she is, like, like, my other mother." – P2

Sub-theme 3: Three Good Things

The three good things intervention involved participants writing daily about three grateful events, covering the causes of those events and their direct or indirect roles in the mentioned events for the duration of seven days.

The category of gratitude towards oneself revealed participants' acknowledgment of their internal positive resources. While finding value in their past actions and feeling more positive about themselves, they became more committed to their acknowledged qualities.

"Doing this activity made me calmer. By focusing on the positive side of things, I want to continue doing good things both for others and myself, and I am committed to my plan. I know that I want everything to turn out well, like my job or others' jobs and other things, like our environment." – P5

The category of gratitude towards others and surroundings demonstrated participants' ability to notice and pay closer attention to the little things they might not have noticed before. They noticed higher value in their relationships and the influence of blessings in their lives.

"um... I am definitely grateful for her and that she has always been honest with me. By exercising honesty with her, she then returned the favor in a positive way. Of course, there are negative people as well. It does not always return in a positive way. But for the people who are honest to me, they are people I have chosen to continue friendships with." – P4

Sub-theme 4: Mental Subtraction

The mental subtraction intervention was the last conducted as it was different from other gratitude interventions and required a focus on the absence of good things in life. Participants identified the person who played the most influential role in their lives and imagined life without this person. After visualizing the unfortunate scenario, each participant was reminded that the significant person identified earlier was, in fact, still present in their lives.

The category of gratitude towards oneself affirmed the participants' acknowledgment of internal positive resources such as strengths, responsibilities, and leadership. By expecting the absence of a significant person and the good things supported by that person, participants recognized their coping skills, such as the ability to accept loss and redirect. After being reminded of the remaining time together, they cherished the opportunity.

"If we had a serious argument and ended up breaking our relationship, I would regret it. I would feel sorry for that too. But, of course, well ... if there is an opportunity to amend or to be nice with each other again, I must take it." – P3

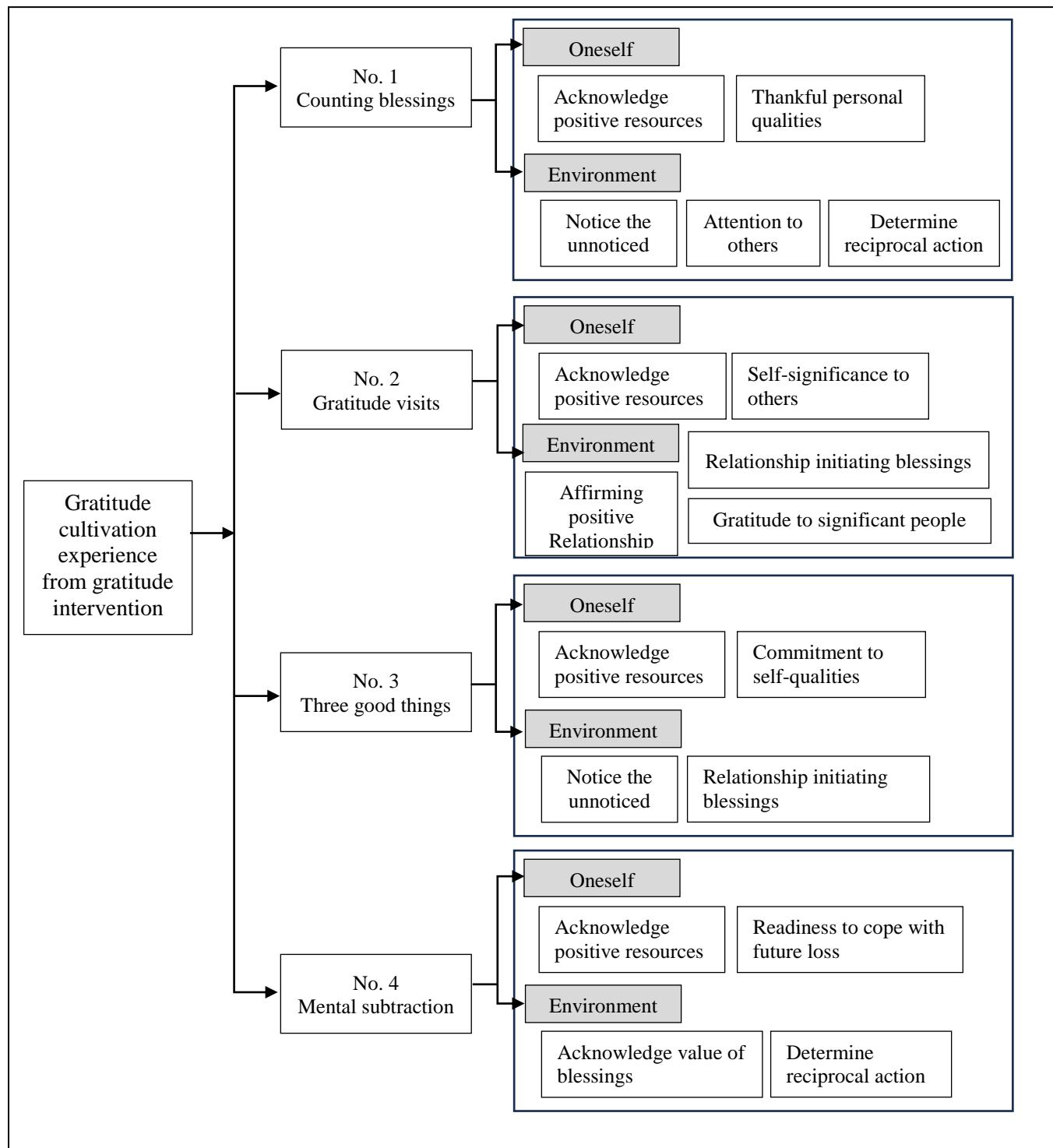
The category of gratitude towards others and surroundings revealed the acknowledgment of the value of blessings in life. While reconsidering that fortunate events in life could also turn into the opposite or be subtracted, participants recognized how blessed they were. They recognized how supportive the significant people had been for them and became determined to take reciprocal action.

“After this, I have to play a role in his life as well. It’s like, like the little things he has done for me gradually sink in. Whatever he does for me, I should repay him in the future. Someday, he may not be able to work as hard. I can, then, support and work for him.” – P1

The theme of gratitude cultivation experience from all four sub-themes of gratitude interventions enhanced gratitude towards oneself and gratitude towards others and the environment. The results were divided into sub-themes and categories, and descriptions for each category are listed according to the intervention plan and completion, as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1

Gratitude Cultivation Experience from Gratitude Intervention Among Working-age Gay Men



Consecutive Experience

The theme of consecutive experience after a two-week follow-up was divided into the sub-theme of consecutive gratitude experience towards oneself and the sub-theme of consecutive gratitude experience towards others and their environment.

Consecutive gratitude experience towards oneself encompasses review and learning, the growth of internal positive resources, and emotional development. After 5-6 weeks of practicing a total of four gratitude interventions, participants continued to internally review their daily experiences, supporting the growth of their internal positive resources and emotional development.

“It’s unlikely for me to be stuck with negativity, negative thoughts. I have been thinking a lot, but not in a negative way. If there is negativity, I would attempt to confute it. In the past, if I didn’t like someone, I would avoid them and disregard them. Now, well, I just talk normally. I don’t really know if I dislike the person, but I would know that once that person was nice to me.” –P2

Consecutive gratitude experience towards others and their environment encompasses noticing the unnoticed, increased empathy for others, growth of positive relationships, and determination to take reciprocal action. Participants continued to notice their surroundings with different views and became more open to new experiences. Their empathy for others increased, supporting the growth of positive relationships. The determination to take reciprocal action also grew stronger.

“I have been taking good care of my family. I have focused on the family. However, now we talk more, ask more, care more, and express our caring attention more. Especially with my stepfather, I rarely spoke to him, but these activities involved him. I reach out to him more. We became closer. When he feels well, he impacts others positively, and that impacts how other people feel as well.” – P1

Discussion and Conclusion

The research findings on the gratitude cultivation experience from gratitude interventions among working-age gay men in Thailand revealed significant positive outcomes. The interventions, which included counting blessings, gratitude visits, three good things, and mental subtraction, enhanced participants' gratitude towards themselves and others. Participants reported increased acknowledgment of their internal positive resources, leading to better coping mechanisms and improved interactions with others. They also noticed qualities in others and their environment that they had previously overlooked, fostering stronger and more empathetic relationships. The consecutive experience revealed that these effects continued, with participants maintaining a positive outlook, increased empathy, and a commitment to reciprocal actions in their relationships. The overall theme highlighted the growth in gratitude towards oneself and others, contributing to personal and relational development.

Gratitude cultivation experience in the theme of gratitude towards oneself is supported by the broaden-and-build theory (Fredrickson, 2004; Fredrickson & Joiner, 2018). By practicing gratitude interventions, participants acknowledged their internal positive resources. They appreciated and felt thankful for them. They recognized their significance, as perceived by others, and cultivated their determination to sustain these qualities. With the development of positive resources, they faced the fear of loss with acceptance and preparation to cope. After two weeks of follow-up, the results revealed that participants continued to review positive experiences. The positive resources and emotional development continued to thrive.

While the increase in positive emotions strengthened their character strengths, positive resources, and well-being, it also enhanced their social resources and support according to the find-bind-remind theory. Gratitude positively impacted interpersonal relationships. The reciprocal action (give-receive) highlighted a beneficial relationship (representing “find”). The positive outcomes and connections reminded them of the value of the relationship (representing “remind”), which supported the relationship to grow stronger (representing “bind”) (Algoe & Stanton, 2012; Cazzell et al., 2023). Cultivating a gratitude experience through gratitude interventions, participants paid closer attention to their interactions with others and surroundings, allowing them to notice previously unnoticed aspects. As their gratitude towards others grew, they acknowledged the values and positive impacts of the relationships on the good things in their lives. The affirmation of positive relationships encouraged them to become more determined to take reciprocal action.

The consecutive experience after completing the gratitude intervention demonstrated that participants continued to notice others and their surroundings from different perspectives. Their empathy for others and positive relationships continued to develop. They were committed to building stronger relationships through reciprocal actions.

From the perspective of symbolic interactionism, these gratitude interventions facilitated continuous reinterpretation and reinforcement of gratitude perception through social interactions. As participants acknowledged their internal positive resources and recognized their value through others' perspectives, they developed a more resilient and appreciative self-concept. This sustained engagement with gratitude contributed to ongoing personal and relational development, demonstrating the dynamic and socially constructed nature of new self-identity (Alver & Caglar, 2015; Blumer, 1969). This research exemplifies inclusivity by focusing on gay men, a marginalized group, contrasting with previous studies on gratitude interventions that primarily involved heterosexual samples (Dewidar et al., 2022). The findings demonstrate that, even though sexual minorities are vulnerable to mental health issues due to societal discrimination and stigma, they still benefit from participating in gratitude interventions. Psychologists and behavioral scientists can use these interventions to enhance the quality of life within the gay male community.

The future development of a Thai language online form would increase access to and use of gratitude interventions. As these interventions are easy to understand, with clear instructions, individuals can start and carry out the activities on their own. The mental subtraction intervention may require an explanation to shift the focus from the absence to the presence of a positive person or event. By emphasizing positive experiences, participants recalled memorable events and valuable relationships. The intervention induced self-care, which would benefit an engaging individual. An online format would be accessible to a larger audience. In particular, SGM people, who tend to avoid others' support or meeting with professional officials or health personnel due to perceptions of discrimination or stigma, could easily access the online form for self-care methods. This would increase the likelihood of them taking care of themselves and prevent potential mental health problems.

Limitations

This research began conducting interviews and activity assignments during the COVID-19 outbreak. Many steps in the research study were subject to disease control measures. Face-to-face interviews required social distancing and wearing masks, making it impossible to see facial expressions from other than the eyes. While under strict travel measures, research participants and researchers were unable to leave their households or travel across districts, necessitating online interviews for certain sessions. Occasionally, there were obstacles such as low or interrupted signals, which affected sound clarity. Participants or the researcher sometimes had to repeat information, extending the interview time required to collect data. For online sessions, the researcher was able to see facial expressions but not body language due to using computer screens.

Since this study was conducted during the pandemic, which may have caused negative psychosocial effects on participants due to quarantine or economic hardships, participants possibly experienced gratitude more easily as a result of gratitude intervention. Therefore, it may be necessary to replicate the study in a normal situation to determine whether participating in a gratitude intervention would still foster psychological growth among gay men as it did in this study. Lastly, participants experienced reduced regular incomes due to the economic situation during the disease outbreak. Some of them had to work extra jobs to cover their expenses, leading to an increased daily workload. Consequently, a few participants were unable to allocate enough time to complete the intervention or schedule an interview, resulting in dropouts.

Implications for Behavioral Science

Despite ongoing research dedicated to enhancing inclusion for sexual minorities, there is a notable gap in studies focusing on character strengths and positive psychology within these groups. This research addresses this gap by integrating knowledge from positive psychological theories, specifically the broaden-and-build theory, and the find-remind-bind theory, along with the symbolic interaction theory from sociology, to fulfill its research objectives. Additionally, the study aligns with sustainable development goals number 3 and 10, which emphasize good health and well-being as well as social equality. By studying an intervention focused on promoting gratitude within this group, the research seeks to provide equal access to well-being, bridging the gap with the heterosexual group.

Conclusion

Gratitude interventions have shown promising benefits across diverse groups in terms of promoting positive emotions, enhancing relationships, and building personal strengths. Incorporating cultural awareness into future studies and intervention designs could further amplify these benefits, ensuring their relevance and effectiveness across diverse communities.

Declarations

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