

Workplace affective well-being: gratitude and friendship in helping millennials to thrive at work

Workplace
affective well-
being

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to examine the relationship between gratitude and workplace friendship with affective well-being (AWB) at work amongst millennial employees. Specifically, it details the mediating effect of workplace friendship in explaining the linkages between gratitude and AWB at work.

Design/methodology/approach – This study used a sample of 272 millennial workers in this study. A survey invitation was sent out to all of the respondents through email. A 20-item job-related AWB (Van Katwyk *et al.*, 2000) scale was used to measure AWB. Workplace friendship was measured using six-items of the workplace friendship scale (Nielsen *et al.*, 2000) and gratitude was measured using McCullough *et al.*'s (2002) six-item gratitude questionnaire (GQ-6).

Findings – The study found that gratitude and workplace friendship enhanced workplace AWB among millennial workers. Workplace friendship functioned as a mediator, which delivered the effect from gratitude towards workplace AWB. Gratitude was found to positively predict workplace friendship and subsequently workplace friendship positively predicted workplace AWB.

Practical implications – Nurturing positive feelings at work through excellent psychosocial resources and healthy work friendships would improve millennial workers well-being. Henceforth, encouraging millennial employees to cultivate workplace friendships, can help the manager to enhance millennial employees' feeling of belongingness, and thus, promote better AWB.

Originality/value – Investment on employee's human capital and values can be valuable resources to increase millennial employees' performance at work. Millennial workers are a unique generation that put emphasis on the subjective experience. Hence, capitalising on their subjective experience can be one of the keys to better increase their well-being and performance at work.

Keywords Gratitude, Millennials, Workplace friendship, AWB

Paper type Research paper



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Introduction

What influences millennial workers' affective well-being (AWB) at work? The recent growth in the positive psychology movement places considerable emphasis on the role of positive emotions and feelings in determining employees' AWB at work (Seligman, 2002). Given its significant relationships with numerous pro-organisational attitudes and behaviours (Hofmann *et al.*, 2014; Ilies *et al.*, 2015), individual happiness has been consistently regarded as one of the most important components of individual well-being at work (Van Horn *et al.*, 2004; Warr, 1990). Experiencing happiness in the workplace may be of particular salience to a new, yet highly dynamic class of workers – Millennials (McGinni and Ng, 2016; Ng *et al.*, 2010). Compared to earlier generations of workers, millennials are considered as having different attitudes and expectations regarding work and workplace behaviours (Kaifi *et al.*, 2012). For instance, despite being described as narcissistic and regarded as a “Look at Me” generation (Pew Research Center, 2007), lacking commitment to an organisation and/or a strong work ethic (Marston, 2009), they may also be considered as being highly confident and achievement focussed (Menon and Alamelu, 2018), which holds true across research studies in various cultural settings (Alsop, 2008).

Current research suggests that millennial employees are likely to accrue significant personal psychological benefits at work by experiencing significant control and autonomy over their work (Gallie, 2007; Yap and Badri, 2020), being a part of dynamic teams, expecting support from colleagues and receiving individual attention from their managers (Sirota and Klein, 2013). Equally important may be the experience of positive emotions, feelings and relations with colleagues in the work environment (Guest, 1998; Baptiste, 2008). The importance of millennial employees subjective experience at work has been put forward in several studies, suggesting the tendency of this cohort to put a higher value on their emotional experience and intrinsic aspect in evaluating their overall satisfaction, performance and decision to retain within the organisation (He *et al.*, 2019; García *et al.*, 2019).

As one of the forms of positive emotion, gratitude is often considered as a moral emotion because it is positively associated with an individual's welfare (Haidt, 2003). Feelings of gratitude often arise when individuals perceive that they are receiving benefits and their power or influence is limited (Emmons and McCullough, 2004). Recently, studies have shown the significance of gratitude as an important personal resource for individuals (Emmons and Shelton, 2002; Snyder *et al.*, 2014) and overall individual well-being (McCullough *et al.*, 2002; Emmons *et al.*, 2003; Watkins, 2014; Wood *et al.*, 2009; Lin, 2016). Past studies have also highlighted how gratitude could act as a cushion in reducing stress and burnout at work (Lee *et al.*, 2018) and serve as a catalyst for prosocial behaviour (Kim and Qu, 2020). However, despite the role of gratitude to improve employee AWB, there continues to be a considerable dearth of knowledge concerning the underlying mechanisms of this relationship especially with respect to working millennials.

In developing a greater understanding of how millennials' feelings of gratitude influence their AWB, this particular study draws on the broaden and build theory (Fredrickson, 2001) to examine the mediating role of workplace friendships. Within the modern workplace, friendships with co-workers both personal and affective in nature are considered as an integral aspect towards developing positive workplace engagement and organisational functionality (Gallup, 2017 as cited in Gates *et al.*, 2019). As a unique individual resource, various scholars have highlighted the unique psychological benefits associated with the emotional and social functions of friendships in the workplace. Yap and Badri (2020) found that friendships at work promoted AWB among millennials. Accordingly, we expect that millennial workers' feelings of gratitude in the workplace will influence their friendships at work, which, in turn, will influence their well-being and happiness.

We test our proposed model using a sample of 272 millennial employees from Malaysia. Specifically, our study adds to the growing literature on the role of gratitude, which is underemphasised within organisational research (Kim and Qu, 2020). In doing so, we extend existing findings by linking gratitude experiences with friendship at work as one of the positive elements that can be used to further improve employees' AWB, especially among the younger generation of worker who will be entering the workplace (Hall, 2016). As millennials are both a talented and dynamic generation, and employers who can meet their expectations would be those who are able to attract and retain them (PricewaterhouseCoopers, P. W. C., 2011). Also, given the significant gap that exists pertaining to millennials' behaviours and their expectations at work (PricewaterhouseCoopers, P. W. C., 2011), has warranted the need for stronger evidence to be established in this subject matter as misunderstanding and tensions towards millennials are often due to stereotypes, perceptions and overreliance on opinion articles, which might not be rooted in empirical research. Thus, understanding millennials in the workplace through research, and to propagate this research to an applied setting by working alongside practitioners would be paramount.

Millennial employees' feelings of gratitude and affective well-being

Given the current nature of one's work, individuals are likely to have various experiences, which may be considered as either positive or negative, important or unimportant or desirable or undesirable in nature (Prizmić-Larsen *et al.*, 2019). Such experiences may have either short- or long-term consequences on the well-being and happiness of individuals (Hentschel *et al.*, 2017). Thus, for many organisations, it is now becoming imperative that they ensure the well-being of their workforce given that happy employees are more likely to positively contribute to the effectiveness of the organisation (Wright and Cropanzano, 2004).

Within the existing literature, scholars have often treated employee happiness as psychological well-being (PWB) (Rego *et al.*, 2011), a multi-dimensional construct comprised of different components of which AWB is one of the most important (Daniels, 2000; Warr, 1990). Unlike subjective well-being which is aligned with hedonic feelings of pleasure and happiness (Diener, 2012), PWB involves happiness in a range of areas in an individual's life including their sense of purpose in life and the quality of their relationships (Ryff, 2014; Ryff and Keyes, 1995). In line with this distinction, AWB refers to "frequent experiences of positive affect encompassing various pleasant moods states such as joy and contentment, and infrequent experiences of negative affect encompassing various unpleasant mood states such as anger and afraid" (Diener *et al.*, 2010; Pavot, 2008 as cited in Prizmić-Larsen *et al.*, 2019, p. 2). The experience of happiness is not limited to emotions alone but encompasses their entire being. Millennial employees who experience AWB at work are more likely to be resilient, creative and sociable at work (Wright and Cropanzano, 2004). They are likely to experience pleasure in the work they do and more importantly, they are likely to remain committed to their jobs and the organisation (Amin and Akbar, 2013; Yuniasanti *et al.*, 2019). Prior research has suggested that how employees may appraise affective experiences can depend on their personality (Hentschel *et al.*, 2017; Leger *et al.*, 2016; Zhang and Tsingan, 2014), personal relationships (Gross and John, 2003) and positive emotions (Hills and Argyl, 1998).

As a form of positive emotions, gratitude has been acknowledged as integral to individual well-being (Wood *et al.*, 2010). Within the existing literature, gratitude has been conceptualised as either an emotion, attitude, a life-orientation and a moral virtue (Wood *et al.*, 2010 as cited in Alkozei, Smith and Killgore, 2018). The notion of gratitude is wide-ranging and includes many facets such as experiencing feelings of thankfulness after getting something of need or value and also feelings concerning a subjective life event, which is perceived as positive. This does not need to be linked with a specific benefactor (e.g. feelings of gratitude when admiring nature)

(Alkozei *et al.*, 2018). In this study, we conceptualise gratitude as an individual disposition, which is as *part of a wider life orientation towards noticing and appreciating the positive in the world* (Wood *et al.*, 2010, p. 891). As a dispositional trait, gratitude may be considered as the stable affective characteristic that is mostly unaffected by single events (McCullough *et al.*, 2004). Dispositional trait gratitude may allow for several individual-level benefits such as increased positive affect, energy and enthusiasm, fewer illnesses, improved sleep, decreased feeling of loneliness and an increased connection with others (Emmons and McCullough, 2003 as cited in Măirean *et al.*, 2019). Not surprisingly, gratitude has been consistently linked to a range of well-being factors such as the pursuit of activities that are intrinsically motivating and social activities that are rewarding, as well as an increased daily self-regard (Lin, 2017; Göcen, 2012; Măirean *et al.*, 2019; Wood *et al.*, 2009).

Feelings of gratitude have been shown to influence an employee's AWB via several ways as it has been considered as an excellent resource to assist in individual coping and the reduction of stress (Chen *et al.*, 2012; Toussaint and Friedman, 2009). Firstly, gratitude has been found to increase the extent to which an individual perceives what they receive from friends and colleagues in the workplace (Wood and Giles-Corti, 2008), by building and strengthening social bonds (Fredrickson, 2004). Thus, such perceived and actual support may help millennial employees to lessen the stressful psychological events in the workplace (Wood and Giles-Corti, 2008), thereby leading to increased levels of well-being and happiness. Secondly, dispositional traits such as gratitude can positively shape not only one's emotions but also their cognitions and behaviours (Rosenberg, 1998). Specifically, individuals with high levels of gratitude may be more likely to positively reframe situations and experiences (Wood and Giles-Corti, 2008). Therefore, grateful millennial employees may be more likely to view negative experiences in the workplace as a positive means such as an opportunity to learn new skills or develop their personal knowledge (Chen *et al.*, 2012; Wood *et al.*, 2007). Finally, a grateful perspective can also help millennial employees with coping on stresses of the workplace by transforming difficulties into opportunities for personal growth and development. For instance, gratitude has been shown to help employees cope with difficult circumstances at work by promoting anticipatory coping methods such as seeking out emotional support from colleagues or friends (Lambert *et al.*, 2009). Hence, by acting as a valuable personal resource, gratitude can help build and develop useful psychological resources such as resilience to deal with difficult circumstances at work. Broadly, the above discussion suggests that grateful dispositions among millennial employees may help them to develop and build their AWB and happiness at work. Having said that, research on gratitude and AWB among a sample of millennials has been minimal to none. Only one recent research done among a sample of millennials by Anyaegbunam and Ihenacho (2019) have found that gratitude negatively predicted positive job stress. Based on the above lines of argument we propose the following hypothesis:

H1. Millennial employees' gratitude is positively related to their AWB.

The mediating role of friendships at work

A recent Gallup (2017) poll revealed that workplace friendships are an integral part of the modern organisational environment as they were found to be an integral component of positive workplace engagement and organisational functionality (Gates *et al.*, 2019). Various studies have highlighted how positive employee relational experiences in the workplace can lead to a number of positive individual outcomes in both employees work and nonwork domains (Greenhaus and Powell, 2006; Parasuraman *et al.*, 1996). Despite a lack of consensus on what constitutes friendship, numerous common traits of enduring and

successful friendships have been identified in the literature (Gates *et al.*, 2019). Broadly, friendships in the workplace can be defined as the deliberate bonds between employees in which confidence, care, emotional support, solidarity, genuineness and trust is shared (Howe, 2011; Pahl, 2000 as cited by Gates *et al.*, 2019). Such a definition of friendships at work is consistent with existing conceptualisations of friendships, which are viewed as relationships that are mutually and freely selected and rooted upon reciprocal support, intimacy and shared values or interests (Hartup and Stevens, 1997 as cited in Craig and Kuykendall, 2019).

Friendships at work may be considered critical to employee attitudes, performance and job satisfaction. Within the modern workplace, friendships act as an essential social and emotional function, which can ultimately influence employee AWB and happiness. As a social function, friendships at work can encourage employees to engage in exploring, collaborating or negotiation with colleagues in the workplace. In research by Sias (2005), it was found that employees who were isolated from networks of friendships at work received less quality information within the organisation. Conversely, individuals who had better friendships at work and quality information sharing were found to have better employee outcomes such as job satisfaction and organisational commitment. Such behaviours may not only lead to commitment among employees but also may increase their well-being and happiness at work through having positive experiences. Additionally, friendship at work may also influence millennial employees' well-being by acting as a crucial resource in regards to mentoring and career development (Gates *et al.*, 2019). For instance, through valued friendships at work, millennial employees can gain access to employee engagement, flourishing, encouragement and support (Colbert *et al.*, 2016; Dutton and Heaphy, 2003; Dutton and Ragins, 2007). Such attributes of friendships at work may ultimately lead to enhanced well-being and happiness.

With respect to their emotional function, friendships at work can further provide comfort and psychological support to millennial employees particularly during negative experiences in the workplace such as organisational, personal stress or burnout (Kickul and Posig, 2001). Rumens (2011) suggested that friendships at work may help to broaden an employee's social circle within the workplace. Hence, the absence of friendships at work could arise to feelings of loneliness at work (Rokach and Brock, 1998), which may prevent millennials employees from meeting the organisation's mission and thereby negatively affecting their quality of life (Gates *et al.*, 2019). Additionally, the absence of friends at work may reduce a millennial employee's ability to cope with stressful events at work as they have little opportunities to communicate pressing issues that affect their work (Sias and Cahill, 1998). Friendships at work may allow millennial employees to have more positive experiences in the workplace, thereby leading to increased AWB and happiness. Further, Yap and Badri (2020) have also argued that workplace friendships might hold higher importance to millennials, as this generation could view relationships at work as an extension of their family, as opposed to boomers who might perceive work relationships as merely transactional. A possibility for this could be due to millennials having a higher likelihood to be still single as compared to boomers (Yap and Badri, 2020), which increases the possibility of them seeking for connections and friendships at work. Based on the above reasoning we propose the following hypothesis:

H2. Millennial employees' friendships at work are positively related to their AWB.

In theorizing how millennial employees' gratitude influences their AWB, this study draws on the broaden-and-build theory (Fredrickson, 1998, 2001) as an overarching theory. According to the broaden-and-build theory, *positive affect encourages individuals to broaden*

the scopes of action, attention, cognition and mindfulness, as well as to focus on new life possibilities and opportunities, and thus, positive affect widens individuals' momentary thought-action repertoires (Lin *et al.*, 2016, p. 402) Furthermore, when individuals experience broadness in cognition, thinking and actions, they are more likely to build cognitive, social and psychological resources that may support themselves when faced with challenging circumstances (Lin *et al.*, 2016). This according to Fredrickson (1998, 2001) may ultimately result in the building of "enduring personal resources", which could range from physical, intellectual, social to psychological (Lin *et al.*, 2016).

McCullough *et al.* (2001) suggested that feelings of gratitude may flow from the perception that an individual has benefited from the voluntary, costly and intentional behaviour of a referent other. Scholars have acknowledged the social utility of emotions in an interaction whereby it allows people to observe and respond to each other's respective emotions (Morris and Keltner, 2000). Emotional expressions allow for the triggering of inferential processes and affective reactions, all in which affects the observer's behaviour (Van Kleef, 2009). Further, expression of emotions also allows for an individual to communicate their welfare to the other person, which allows for the interaction partner to respond to the individual's specific needs (Clark and Finkel, 2004). Thus, all this allows for observers to make sense of their interaction partners (Methot *et al.*, 2017).

Moreover, research has shown gratitude, to be a crucial determinant in cultivating social bonds (Algoe, Fredrickson and Gable, 2013), and as a catalyst for both relationship formation and maintenance (Algoe, Haidt and Gable, 2008). Further, research has also found that gratitude facilitated an increased affiliation even with previously unacquainted individuals (Williams and Bartlett, 2015). Algoe *et al.* (2008) in his research further builds upon previous literature that argues for the positive function of gratitude as a detection and response system, in which we bind ourselves to attentive others on our needs and preferences – all in which strengthens social relationships.

Therefore, from a broaden-and-build theory perspective, millennial employees' experiences and expressions of gratitude in the workplace may reinforce increased reciprocity among colleagues at work, which may ultimately over time and may encourage the development of more cohesive friendships at work (Trivers, 1971). Additionally, as individuals are innately social creatures, the development of friendships at work may allow millennial employees to thrive in the workplace. Specifically, we posit that meaningful relationships at work may serve as an important personal resource for millennial employees, which may help them to not only flourish and thrive at work but also to anticipate and cope with any negative experiences they encounter at work (Methot *et al.*, 2017). Hence, based on the above reasoning we propose the following hypothesis:

H3. Millennial employees' friendships at work mediate the relationship between gratitude and their AWB.

Methodology

Design and method of analysis

This study used a quantitative approach using a cross-sectional design. Data was collected through surveys at a single point of time. Data was analysed using AMOS, statistical package of social science (SPSS) and PROCESS MACRO extension.

Samples and procedures

Our samples were 272 working millennials from the corporate services industry. Participants must meet a total of two criteria to be eligible for participating in our study. Firstly, they were to have undergone full-time employment for at least one year and their age needed to be only in between 23 to 39 years old when this study took place to be considered as a millennial. Before real data collection, an initial pilot test was conducted to confirm the reliability of all instruments. The result suggested that all the three instruments used had satisfied cut-off for Cronbach alpha value of higher than 0.70. Snowball sampling strategy was then deployed to recruit our respondents during the real data collection. It was chosen due to its advantage in producing timely data and low running cost. Data collection took place in two months. An email invitation was sent through the link in social media (i.e. Facebook) and email to the researchers' circle of friends. Those who received the link were encouraged and allowed to circulate the link to their circle of friends. A total of 1,005 invitation were sent out, with only 272 useable responses were returned at the end of data collection, representing 27.1% response rate. In terms of demographics, 64% of the respondents were female and 36% were male. The average for respondents' age in this study was 27 years old (SD = 3.2). Majority of the participants had an average of four years of working experience.

Ethical consideration

This study has gained approval from the Division of Organisational and Applied Psychology, University of Nottingham Malaysia ethics committee. Upon dissemination of the survey, all participants were briefed about the nature of the study, anonymity, voluntary terms and data protected act. All respondents were required to click the agree button before answering the survey to indicate their agreement to all terms of the study.

Measures

Workplace friendship was measured using six-items of the workplace friendship scale (Nielsen *et al.*, 2000). All items were rated using a five-point Likert-scale ranging from 1-strongly disagree to 5-strongly agree. The scale surpassed the Cronbach alpha cut-off with the reliability of 0.82. A sample of the item includes *He/she has formed strong friendships at work*. In the other hand, employee's gratitude was measured using McCullough *et al.*'s (2002) six-item gratitude questionnaire (GQ-6). All items were rated with a seven-point Likert-scale ranging from 1-strongly disagree to 7-strongly agree. A sample of an item is *If I had to list everything that I feel grateful for, it would be a very long list*. The scale had good reliability with Cronbach alpha value of 0.78, respectively.

Meanwhile, millennial employee's AWB was measured using Van Katwyk *et al.*'s (2000) 20-item job-related affective well-being scale (JAWS). All items were rated with a five-point Likert-scale ranging from 1-never until 5-extremely often. A sample of the item is *my job made me feel at ease*.

Validity and reliability of the scales

We performed confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) to confirm the construct validity of all scales. CFA is a robust statistical procedure that is widely used to measure variables represented in a construct with the advantage of data modelling using a single model (Ullman and Bentler, 2003). Observation of construct validity was executed using the goodness of fit index, which established using indexes including the χ^2 (df) statistic, the comparative fit index (CFI), the Tucker-Lewis index (TLI), the incremental fit index (IFI), the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) and the standardised root mean

square index (SRMR). Values below 0.07 for the SRMR, below 0.08 for the RMSEA and above 0.95 for the CFI, TLI and IFI indicate an acceptable model fit (Hu and Bentler, 1999). Only items above 0.50 for factor loading were retained

Based on the CFA analysis, job AWB was found as a unidimensional construct – $\chi^2 (n = 272) = 360.301, p < 0.001, \chi^2/df = 3.028, RMSEA = 0.080, TLI = 0.900, CFI = 0.912, IFI = 0.91$ aligned with the original suggestion by Van Katwyk *et al.*'s (2000). A total of three items were deleted for this construct due to the poor factor loading below than 0.60, which indicated distant deviation from the latent construct. Gratitude likewise was a unidimensional with one item deleted due to poor loading $\chi^2 (n = 272) = 13.330, p < 0.001, \chi^2/df = 2.666, RMSEA = 0.078, TLI = 0.973, CFI = 0.986, IFI = 0.986$. Meanwhile, all the six items for workplace friendship loaded with a good model fit $\chi^2 (n = 272) = 23.954, p = 0.008, \chi^2/df = 2.395, RMSEA = 0.072, TLI = 0.958, CFI = 0.972, IFI = 0.958$.

Convergent validity and discriminant validity were assessed using the average variance extracted (AVE) index. Result showed that all scales in this study yielded a good convergent validity with AVE exceeded 0.50 (Table 1). All of the scales also had acceptable discriminant validity (\sqrt{x} AWB = 0.779, \sqrt{x} gratitude = 0.071, \sqrt{x} workplace friendship = 0.744) and all square root of AVE scores were greater than the inter-construct correlation. Reliability of all scales also exceeded cut-off 0.70 with job AWB scored at 0.928, gratitude at 0.852 and workplace friendship at 0.861.

Descriptive statistics and interrelationship between variables

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics and inter-relationships between the variables of the study. In summary, the majority of our respondents are female employee with 175 and 96 are male. Almost two quarter with 202 of the respondents have been working for less than 5 years, 58 among them had between 5 to 10 years of tenure and the remaining 12 had work for more than 10 years. Workplace friendship ($r = 0.516, p < 0.01$) and gratitude ($r = 0.422, p < 0.01$) shows moderate positive relationships with JAWS (Table 2).

Test for alternative mediator

In testing the vigour of our proposed model, we test for potential of alternative mediator by observing the model fit and comparing akaike information index (AIC) and indirect estimates values for all possible models. Table 3 presented all the possible pathways in this study. Based on the result, we found that our proposed Model B yielded the best-fitted model with ΔAIC value found the lowest ($\Delta AIC = 49.987$) and stronger indirect estimates (indirect effects = 0.166, LLCI: 0.089, ULCI: 0.258) compared to alternative Models A and C. Therefore, based on this suggestion, we proceeded with our proposed conceptual framework for the mediation analysis.

Mediating effect of friendship at work

Mediation analysis was performed using the PROCESS MACRO extension using SPSS. To run the test, direct, indirect and total effects were observed based on 95% BC confidence interval. The effect of gender and work tenure were controlled for, as prior studies suggest that women are likely to be more emotionally responsive (Umberson *et al.*, 1996; Napholz, 1995) and the total of job tenure of the employee may influence their level of AWB due to different perceived stress-stressor relationship (Bradley, 2007). Direct effect results suggested that both workplace friendship ($\beta = 0.255, p < 0.001$) and gratitude ($\beta = 0.413, p < 0.001$) were significant predictors of millennial employee's AWB. Hence, H1 and H2 were supported.

Construct	Items	Convergent validity		Reliability
		Factor loading	AVEa	
Job AWB	My job made me feel angry	0.68	0.608	0.928
	My job made me feel anxious	0.60	—	—
	My job made me feel at ease	0.63	—	—
	My job made me feel bored (<i>deleted</i>)	0.38	—	—
	My job made me feel calm (<i>deleted</i>)	0.52	—	—
	My job made me feel content	0.65	—	—
	My job made me feel depressed	0.84	—	—
	My job made me feel discouraged	0.83	—	—
	My job made me feel disgusted	0.74	—	—
	My job made me feel ecstatic	0.68	—	—
	My job made me feel energetic	0.80	—	—
	My job made me feel enthusiastic	0.85	—	—
	My job made me feel excited	0.86	—	—
	My job made me feel fatigued	0.60	—	—
	My job made me feel frightened	0.60	—	—
	My job made me feel furious	0.76	—	—
	My job made me feel gloomy	0.82	—	—
	My job made me feel inspired	0.75	—	—
	My job made me feel relaxed (<i>deleted</i>)	0.54	—	—
	My job made me feel satisfied	0.80	—	—
Gratitude	I have so much in life to be thankful for	0.88	0.554	0.852
	If I had to list everything that I felt grateful for, it would be a very long list	0.86	—	—
	When I look at the world, I do not see much to be grateful for	0.65	—	—
	I am grateful to a wide variety of people	0.66	—	—
	As I get older, I find myself more able to appreciate the people, events and situations that have been part of my life history	0.63	—	—
Workplace friendship	Long amounts of time can go by before I feel grateful to something or someone (<i>deleted</i>)	0.16	—	—
	I have formed strong friendships at work	0.80	0.509	0.861
	I socialise with co-workers outside of the workplace	0.63	—	—
	I can confide in people at work	0.71	—	—
	I feel I can trust many co-workers a great deal	0.71	—	—
	Being able to see my co-workers is one reason why I look forward to my job	0.75	—	—
	I do not feel that anyone I work with is a true friend (<i>R</i>)	0.67	—	—

Table 1.
Confirmatory factor
analysis result

	f	%	Mean	STD	Skew	Kur	GEN	WT	GRA	WF	AWB
Gender	272	100	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Male	97	35.7	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Female	175	64.3	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Work tenure	272	101	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Less than 5 years	202	74.3	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Between 5 to 10 years	58	21.3	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
More than 10 years	12	4.4	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Gender	-	-	1.643	0.480	-0.602	-1.650	1	-	-	-	-
Work tenure	-	-	1.301	0.548	1.653	1.805	-0.053	1	-	-	-
Gratitude	-	-	5.536	0.889	-0.729	0.831	0.144*	0.036	1	-	-
Workplace friendship	-	-	3.572	0.702	-0.494	0.400	-0.056	-0.020	0.402**	1	-
AWB	-	-	3.227	0.661	-0.652	0.545	0.011	0.001	0.393**	0.490**	1

Table 2.
Inter relations
between variables

Notes: **p* is significant at <0.05, ** <0.005, *** <0.001, STD is standard deviation, Skew is skewness, Kur is kurtosis, GEN is gender, WT is work tenure, GRA is gratitude, WF is workplace friendship, AWB is affective well-being

Model	Pathway	AIC	ΔAIC	Indirect effects		
				Estimates	LLCI	ULCI
Model A	G → AWB → WF	29.118	52.147	0.156	0.069	0.189
Model B* ^p	G → WF → AWB	26.868	49.897	0.166	0.089	0.258
Model C	AW → G → WF	55.708	73.737	0.103	0.050	0.162

Table 3.
Test for alternative
mediators

Notes: *^p is proposed model, AIC is Akaike information criterion index, LLCI is lower limit confidence interval, ULCI is upper limit confidence interval

Mediation effect results revealed that workplace friendship was a significant (total effects = 0.0574, LLCI: 0.317, ULCI: 0.870) mediator (partial effects = 0.0031, LLCI: 0.017, ULCI: 0.045) in the relationship between gratitude and AWB at work with better estimates observed in the total effect result. The significant indirect effect (indirect effects = 0.123, LLCI: 0.089, ULCI: 0.258) and direct effect (direct effect = 0.174, *p* = 0.001) showed that workplace friendship act as a partial mediator suggesting that the effect of gratitude towards AWB can either be through a direct path or via workplace friendship (Figure 1 and Table 4).

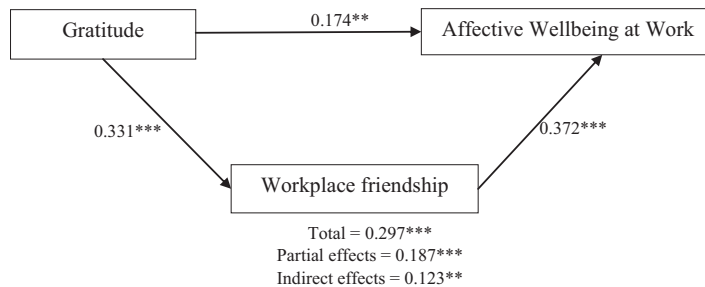


Figure 1.
Findings of the study

Table 4.
Mediating effect
result

	Direct effect path co-efficient		Indirect effects	
	Workplace friendship	AWB	Estimates	95% BC interval (LLCI, ULCI)
Gratitude	0.331 (0.000)	0.174 (0.006)	–	–
Workplace friendship	–	0.372 (0.001)	–	–
Gender*controlled*	–0.171 (0.034)	–	–	–
Work tenure*controlled*	–0.053 (0.455)	–	–	–
Total				
Gratitude → WF → AWB	–	–	0.297 (0.000)	0.214, 0.380
Partial				
Gratitude → WF → AWB	–	–	0.187 (0.001)	0.109, 0.279
Indirect				
Gratitude → WF → AWB	–	–	0.123 (0.000)	0.089, 0.258

Discussion

This study is set out to examine the mechanisms through which millennial employees' gratitude influences their AWB in the workplace. Specifically, we examined the mediating role of millennials' friendships at work in this relationship. Drawing on empirical evidence from 272 millennial employees working in corporate services companies, friendships at work were found to mediate the relationship in their feelings of gratitude and AWB. Our findings make a valuable and timely contribution to the literature.

Firstly, our findings complement existing studies regarding the links between gratitude and AWB (Mairean *et al.*, 2019; Nezelek *et al.*, 2017; Toussaint and Friedman, 2009). Specifically, we add further empirical evidence concerning the positive relationship between gratitude and AWB, which has been to date limited in the literature (Chen *et al.*, 2012; Toussaint and Friedman, 2009). From a positive psychology perspective, our finding alludes to the notion of gratitude in conferring several positive cognitive and physical experiences on millennial employees. Particularly, our finding suggests that gratitude positively influences millennial employees' AWB at work by broadening their ability to think, act and to seek out new experiences, people and activities in their workplace. Such motivations and actions can be particularly beneficial to the AWB of millennial employees by developing their capacity to reappraise and deal with challenging issues at work, put closure to traumatic events in the workplace and to also increase their awareness and enjoyment of work-related tasks and activities. In this regard, it can be argued that millennial employees' sense of gratitude can help to promote their psychological safety in the workplace (Edmondson, 2002). Hence, millennial employees who experience a sense of psychological safety in the workplace are more likely to be happier in their roles as they will be more confident and willing to express their ideas and opinions to others and will be less likely to be affected by toxic emotions in the workplace such jealousy and injustice (Emmons, 2003).

Secondly, the findings from the study also extend the existing literature's understanding of the mechanisms through which gratitude affects an employee's effective well-being. Specifically, our findings showed that millennial employees' friendships at work mediate the relationship between their gratitude and AWB. Our study also ascertained that the effect of gratitude towards AWB was stronger via workplace friendship. Gratuitous millennial employees are likely to seek out and build high-quality relationships and friendships in the workplace through their increased social awareness. Through building high-quality friendships in the workplace, millennial employees' social connectedness may also increase. Under such situations, millennial employees may be more willing to seek out physical and

psychological support from their friends in the workplace in times of need. Furthermore, through high-quality relations and friendships in the workplace, millennial employees may also feel more confident to propose new ideas and to engage in prosocial behaviours, which not only benefit their organisations but also themselves. Collectively, such a finding reaffirms popular notions in the literature that gratitude is essential in constructing positive and meaningful relationships in the workplace (Hu and Kaplan, 2015; Di Fabio and Kenny, 2016). The findings further suggest the social benefits associated with gratitude, which serve as an important exploratory factor in understanding how it influences employee AWB.

Finally, our study also demonstrates the importance of examining the effects of gratitude and friendships at work among different populations of interest. Currently, much of existing research investigating on how such factors impact AWB has been done by investigating among the lifespan of adults (Lacey *et al.*, 2016; Brunetto *et al.*, 2012; Macky *et al.*, 2008) and adolescents (Weinstein, 2018; Moreira, *et al.*, 2015). However, corresponding research among millennial employees is sorely lacking. This is surprising given that prior research has suggested that both positive emotional experiences and friendships at work are important determinants of their efficiency, performance and well-being (Ting and Ho, 2017; Craig and Kuykendall, 2019). Thus, by doing so, we also respond to recent calls in the literature by Di Fabio (2017) to investigate the association between gratitude and hedonic well-being in the workplace.

Managerial implications, limitations and suggestion for future research

Our results showed that it would be worthwhile for organisations to promote positive affect in the workplace because positive emotions facilitate optimal functioning and enhanced well-being (Fredrickson and Joiner, 2002). The millennial generation represents a cohort of workers who value their social relationships and put a high premium in maintaining work-life balance and subjective experiences at work (Abdi *et al.*, 2018). Hence, organisations need to look into ways to enhance positive feelings at work by providing psychosocial resources and promoting healthy friendships at work to increase their employee well-being.

Furthermore, organisations should look into ways to promote meaningful friendships at work. This is especially important for millennial employees' AWB, which past studies have shown to be positively connected with various pro-organisational behaviours such as greater engagement, performance and lesser absenteeism (Fisher, 2010). As millennials place a high value on relationships, they tend to perform better in organisations where they feel valued, trusted and can have meaningful social interactions. They represent a generation that jumps at the chance to meet others and mix in social settings (Brogan and Smith, 2009). Hence, by encouraging millennial employees to cultivate workplace friendships, managers can help enhance feelings of belongingness and promote better AWB at work that can facilitate future skill development, improve competency and growth among this group of workers (Fisher, 2010).

Moreover, millennials are motivated by challenging tasks and continuously strive to find ways to look for work that will meet their high expectations regarding their careers (Aleksić *et al.*, 2017). Managers and supervisors, therefore, need to provide them with work challenges to prevent monotony and boredom. In doing so, they will create favourable work dynamics, which, in turn, would allow this new generation of workers to flourish and enjoy the work that they are doing. We reason that positive affect at work facilitates employees' ability to derive meaning from work, which enhances employee well-being. However, developing this area of interest requires the organisation to find a balance between understanding millennials' expectation and fulfilling their needs over time. Although handling millennials' expectations continue to be one of the biggest challenges for

organisations employing this cohort of employees (Carpenter and de Charon, 2014), fostering positive organisational cultures that cultivate a higher sense of gratitude among this group of workers can be one of the alternatives to motivate them and facilitate their effectiveness within the organisation.

As with any study, there are several limitations to the current study. Firstly, the study design is cross-sectional in nature. Hence, causality among the relationships investigated here cannot be inferred. Accordingly, future research may benefit from adopting a longitudinal approach to examine the relationships in this study. For example, it is quite plausible that when millennial employees experience happiness in the workplace, their feelings of gratitude may further increase. Hence, future research may also wish to incorporate the concept of 'gain spirals' (Halbesleben and Wheeler, 2015) to examine such proposed relationships.

Secondly, this study adopted an individual-based approach to examining the determinants of friendships at work and millennial employee's AWB. Yet, both friendships at work and AWB may also be affected by a range of organisational and societal level factors. For instance, future research may wish to examine how conflicts in the workplace (Kelly *et al.*, 2014) and the negative spillover effects of the family to work conflict (Li *et al.*, 2015) may also affect the formation of friendships at work and employee AWB. Particularly worthwhile here may be the use of mediated-moderation studies to further explore the boundary conditions under which friendships at work are formed and how they influence employee AWB at work.

Finally, empirical evidence for this study was drawn from a sample of millennial employees in corporate service from Malaysia. Malaysia is often considered a collectivist country, and a country in which friendships are highly valued and emotional displays in the workplace are often highly regulated (Santos *et al.*, 2015). Hence, future research may wish to investigate the proposed relationships in this, particularly among differing cross-cultural contexts or from different workplace setting. Doing so may give unique insights into how and why employees' feelings of gratitude could influence their AWB at work and to develop a greater understanding of millennial worker that work in other occupational setting.

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