

The Thank-You Letter Effect

Expressed versus recorded gratitude: a systematic review of gratitude-expression interventions

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22 September 2026



KEY NUMBER

0.22

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Does delivering gratitude to a person outperform writing it privately?

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Abstract

Does delivering gratitude to a person outperform writing it privately? A pooled expressed-minus-recorded Hedges g is not yet possible, so the number we can defend is Kirca, Malouff and Meynadier (2023): expressed gratitude versus a neutral control, $g = 0.22$, 95% CI [0.11, 0.33], from 25 randomised samples and 6,745 adults. Fewer than five eligible adult trials isolate delivered thanks versus private journaling with extractable effects, so this paper is a PRISMA-informed systematic review with narrative synthesis, not a new meta-analysis. That $g = 0.22$ estimate mixes delivered letters, unsent letters and mixed-intent writing. Inside the same review, whether the letter had reached the recipient before post-test did not moderate expresser wellbeing ($Q(2) = 0.30$, $p = .86$; delivered $g = 0.19$). Head-to-head trials tell a split story. One Irish trial found that adding a weekly thank-you to a gratitude journal improved affect balance and lowered low-mood scores at three weeks. A United States trial of 916 students found that a private unsent letter already lifted positive affect (partial $d = 0.29$) and life satisfaction (partial $d = 0.17$); texting the benefactor added connectedness (partial $d = 0.18$), not extra happiness. Recipients, measured separately, feel more positive than expressers predict ($d = 0.74$). Indian and other collectivist samples show smaller or null state-gratitude effects and more indebtedness. For an Indian workplace programme the honest product is a short written thank-you, optionally sent on WhatsApp to a person of the writer's choice, never mandated up the hierarchy. Certainty is moderate for a small expressed-versus-control effect on expresser wellbeing and very low for any incremental happiness from delivery.

02

Key findings box

KEY FINDINGS

0.22

0.22 is the pooled Hedges g for expressed gratitude versus a neutral control across 25 randomised samples and 6,745 adults (Kirca et al., 2023). That is a small effect: detectable in a group, easy to miss in one noisy week.

0.19

0.19 is the delivered-letter subgroup in the same review. Unsent letters sat at $g = 0.27$. The delivery-versus-no-delivery test was null ($p = .86$). Sending the note does not buy the writer extra happiness.

916

916 United States students in Walsh, Regan, Twenge and Lyubomirsky (2022) showed that a private letter already raised positive affect (partial $d = 0.29$). A one-to-one text beat the other gratitude arms only on connectedness (partial $d = 0.18$) and felt support (partial $d = 0.16$).

0.74

0.74 is how far expressers underestimate the recipient's positive mood after a gratitude letter (Kumar and Epley, 2018, Experiment 1, 80 recipients). They also overestimate awkwardness ($d = 0.32$). The missed value sits with the other person.

431

431 Indian adults in Shin and colleagues (2020) did not rise in state gratitude after an unsent letter, unlike the United States arm. They did report more elevation and less negative affect. Dixit and Sinha (2024), $N = 312$ Indian undergraduates, found gains only when the target was a person of choice, not an immediate family member.

03**Definition block****DEFINITION**

Expressed gratitude is a short, specific thank-you aimed at a living person who has helped you. The classic form is the gratitude letter or gratitude visit: you name the act, name the cost to the other person, and name what it meant. Recorded gratitude is the same material written for yourself and kept — a journal, a list, an unsent letter, a note in a phone. Both are practices, not programmes of care. Both can be done as countable daily or weekly reps. The scientific question is not whether gratitude “works”. The question is whether the extra step of handing the words to someone changes the writer’s wellbeing, the relationship, or the recipient, relative to writing the words and stopping there.

04**Introduction**

A project lead in Pune has people to thank. Top of the list is the colleague who took her early client call when her son was ill. In the cab to work she opens WhatsApp and types, “Thank you for Tuesday. You saved me.” Then she pictures him reading it and frowning. So she does what most of us do. She deletes the line and saves it in her notes app for “later”. By Friday the note is one closed tab among many.

This paper asks a shop-floor question dressed in academic clothes. Does delivering gratitude to a person outperform writing it privately?

The question matters in India for four unromantic reasons.

First, Indian offices already run on implicit thanks. Tea appears. A junior stays late. A parent wires fees. The culture of *jugaad* and family duty makes gratitude feel both obvious and dangerous. Titova and colleagues found that 49 per cent of Indian letter-writers mentioned debt, against 16 per cent of Anglo-American writers. If a practice raises indebtedness without raising warmth, a team lead who mandates “gratitude visits” has shipped a product nobody asked for.

Second, the channel already exists. EmotionApp and every HR WhatsApp group already carry one-to-one messages. Walsh and colleagues (2022) found that a text to the benefactor was the condition that lifted connectedness. Face-to-face theatre is not required. The visit in Seligman, Steen, Park and Peterson (2005) was a 2005 internet study with a one-week deadline to travel and read the letter aloud. That is a beautiful experiment. It is a poor operating system for a 55-hour week.

Third, Indian data are thin and not interchangeable with California student data. Shin, Armenta, Kamble, Chang, Wu and Lyubomirsky (2020) ran the same unsent-letter prompt in India ($N = 431$), Taiwan ($N = 112$) and the United States ($N = 307$). United States participants rose in state

gratitude. Indian and Taiwanese participants did not. Indian participants rose in elevation and dropped in negative affect. A 2024 Indian undergraduate trial found that thanking a person of choice moved affect; thanking an immediate family member did not. Any India-facing programme that copies a Western gratitude visit and aims it at parents or bosses is flying without instruments.

Fourth, the popular story is ahead of the trials. Self-help treats the gratitude visit as the Ferrari and the journal as the bicycle. Seligman and colleagues did find that the visit produced the largest immediate happiness jump of five exercises. They also found that the jump was gone by three months, while “three good things” was still visible at six. In machine-learning language, the visit is a high learning-rate update: a sharp drop in the loss function, then overfitting to one evening. The journal is stochastic gradient descent: smaller steps, more epochs, more chance of generalising.

Picture two colleagues in the same Hyderabad office after a hard release. Both feel the same warmth towards the tester who stayed late to catch the last bug. One types it into a private note and closes his laptop. The other walks to the tester’s desk and says it out loud. The first has already had most of the good feeling. The second has done something more. She has tested her fear of sounding odd against the tester’s actual face. She has spoken up while part of her wanted to hide. And she has acted like the colleague she wants to be — not because it feels good in the minute, but because that colleague says thank you. An entrepreneur would call the unsent letter a slide deck. The sent message is a shipped product. Customers, it turns out, like the product more than the founder predicted.

Cregg and Cheavens (2021) warned that gratitude practices are modest tools for low mood and anxiety ($g = -0.29$ at post-test). Davis and colleagues (2016) warned that gratitude rarely beats another active psychological exercise ($d = -0.03$ against a psychologically active comparison). This review does not reopen those wars. It asks one narrower question for EmotionApp’s coaching stack: when an Indian professional has ten minutes, should the rep be a private note or a message that leaves the phone?

We positioned the question against three landmarks. Seligman and colleagues (2005) put the gratitude visit on the map. Kumar and Epley (2018) showed that expressers systematically undervalue the recipient’s experience. Cregg and Cheavens (2021) put a ceiling on clinical-style claims. Kirca, Malouff and Meynadier (2023) then pooled expressed-gratitude trials and found a small, real effect against doing nothing. None of those papers closed the expressed-versus-recorded increment. That is the gap this review maps.

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Methods

5.1 Protocol and fallback rule

The review followed PRISMA 2020 reporting items for a systematic review of intervention trials. The pre-specified analysis plan was a random-effects (REML) pool of Hedges g with 95 per cent confidence intervals, I^2 , τ^2 , a 95 per cent prediction interval, Egger’s test, trim-and-fill, leave-one-out sensitivity, RoB 2 and GRADE. Pre-specified moderators were in-person versus written delivery, known recipient versus stranger, and India or collectivist samples. Expresser and recipient outcomes were to be pooled separately.

The protocol contained a hard fallback. If fewer than five eligible trials isolated expressed (letter, visit or message delivered to a person) versus recorded (journal or unsent letter) gratitude in adults, we would not pool. We would deliver a systematic review with narrative synthesis and say plainly that a meta-analysis of the increment is not yet possible. That fallback was triggered.

5.2 Eligibility

Population. Adults, 18 years and over. Student samples were eligible if participants were adults. Youth-only trials (for example Froh, Kashdan, Ozimkowski and Miller, 2009) were excluded from the adult synthesis.

Intervention. Gratitude expression delivered, or intended to be delivered, to a recipient: letter, visit, text, email, note, or spoken thanks after a written prompt.

Comparator. Private gratitude journaling, unsent letters, gratitude lists, or a neutral control. Trials that compared expression only with a neutral control were retained as context, not as answers to the increment question.

Outcomes. Primary: wellbeing, positive affect, relationship quality, and recipient outcomes where reported. Secondary: life satisfaction, happiness, low-mood scores, connectedness, support, indebtedness, elevation.

Design and years. Randomised and controlled trials, 2005 to 2026. Mixed-methods pre–post studies without a control arm (for example Stefan and colleagues’ 2021 graduate gratitude-visit paper) were excluded from effect-size tables.

Language and setting. No language restriction in principle. In practice the retrieved adult RCTs were English-language. India-resident and collectivist samples were flagged, not excluded.

We did not name trademarked instruments in the public text. We describe what was measured (life satisfaction, positive affect, low mood, connectedness) rather than the brand of the scale.

5.3 Information sources and search strings

Searches covered PubMed, PsycINFO-equivalent strings via Scopus and Web of Science interfaces, Google Scholar, CTRI (India), ClinicalTrials.gov and OSF preprints, plus forward and backward citation from Seligman et al. (2005), Davis et al. (2016), Dickens (2017), Cregg and Cheavens (2021) and Kirca et al. (2023). Search window: January 2005 to 21 September 2026.

PubMed

("gratitude letter"[tiab] OR "gratitude visit"[tiab] OR "gratitude expression"[tiab] OR "expressed gratitude"[tiab] OR "thank-you letter"[tiab]) AND (randomi*[tiab] OR "controlled trial"[tiab] OR RCT[tiab])

Scopus / Web of Science analogue

TITLE-ABS-KEY("gratitude letter" OR "gratitude visit" OR "gratitude expression") AND TITLE-ABS-KEY(randomi* OR "controlled trial")

PsycINFO-style topical string

gratitude AND (letter OR visit OR express*) AND (wellbeing OR "life satisfaction" OR "positive affect" OR happiness) AND (randomi* OR "controlled trial")

Google Scholar

"gratitude letter" OR "gratitude visit" randomi* with the year filter 2005–2026.

ClinicalTrials.gov

gratitude letter OR gratitude visit

CTRI

gratitude

OSF

gratitude letter OR gratitude visit

Kirca et al. (2023) original string (April 2022), retained as the backbone of the expressed-versus-control evidence

gratitude AND (express* OR convey* OR visit* OR letter) AND (wellbeing OR happiness OR "positive affect" OR "life satisfaction") AND (control* OR comparison) AND (intervention* OR experiment*), run on EBSCO, ProQuest, PubMed and Scopus.

5.4 PRISMA 2020 flow counts

These counts are a reconstructed flow for a rapid update review. They combine Kirca and colleagues' April 2022 screen with a 2022–2026 top-up and a targeted hunt for delivered-versus-recorded contrasts. They are not a dual-independent de novo screen of every database hit.

Records identified: about 2,400 (Google Scholar about 1,200; PubMed about 180; Scopus and Web of Science combined about 400; trial registries about 40; prior-review citation chasing about 580).

Duplicates removed: about 700.

Title and abstract screened: about 1,700.

Full text assessed: about 120.

Excluded at full text: not randomised or controlled; not adults; multi-component positive-psychology packages that buried gratitude inside kindness, strengths and hope; no wellbeing, affect, relationship or recipient outcome; no extractable contrast; youth-only samples; medical “thank-you card” service studies.

Eligible expressed-gratitude randomised trials with a control arm: about 30, aligning with Kirca's 25 samples plus post-2022 Walsh and Regan trials and the 2024 Indian undergraduate trial.

Eligible adult randomised trials that isolate delivered expression versus private recording with an extractable increment: three peer-reviewed trials and one master's thesis. The thesis is noted and excluded from any informal pooling.

A new random-effects pool of expressed-minus-recorded g was therefore not computed.

5.5 Extraction fields

For each eligible trial we extracted: first author and year; design; country; language of delivery; n randomised and n analysed; dose in sessions and minutes; delivery channel (in person, letter, email, text, social media, unsent); whether the recipient was known; guidance (prompt only versus coached); outcome measure family; timepoints; expresser outcomes; recipient outcomes if any; and risk-of-bias notes. Where a paper reported partial d , partial r or eta-squared rather than Hedges g , we report the authors' metric and do not convert it into a homemade g .

5.6 Analysis plan as executed

Random-effects pooling was reserved for the increment contrast. That contrast failed the five-trial rule. We therefore report, without re-pooling, the existing Kirca et al. (2023) REML estimate for expressed gratitude versus neutral control, the Choi, Cha, McCullough, Coles and Oishi (2025) cultural meta-analysis for all gratitude practices, and a narrative synthesis of the head-to-head trials. Expresser wellbeing and recipient experience are kept in separate paragraphs. Publication-bias and heterogeneity statistics are taken from the source meta-analyses, not recomputed. Risk of bias is summarised with RoB 2 domains applied qualitatively. Certainty is graded with GRADE.

Anything we could not verify against a DOI, a PubMed record or an open PDF is marked UNVERIFIED and kept out of numerical claims.

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Results

6.1 What the map looks like

The literature is not a neat two-arm race. It is three piles.

Pile one: expressed gratitude versus doing nothing or doing a neutral writing task. This pile is large enough to have been meta-analysed twice in the last four years.

Pile two: recorded gratitude — lists, journals, unsent letters — versus the same kind of control. This pile is older (Emmons and McCullough, 2003 sits just outside our 2005 start) and is folded into Davis, Dickens, Cregg and Cheavens, and Choi et al.

Pile three: delivered versus recorded, in the same adults, in the same trial. This pile is small. It is the pile the title promised. It cannot yet carry a pooled g .

6.2 Study-characteristics table

Study	Design	Country	n	Contrast	Dose	Channel	Recipient known	Outcomes	Timepoints
Seligman et al., 2005	6-arm internet RCT	Mixed, mostly US	577 baseline; 411 completers	Visit vs early-memories placebo	1 week to write and deliver	In-person visit	Yes	Happiness; low-mood scores	Post, 1 week, 1 month, 3 months, 6 months
Toepfer et al., 2012	2-arm controlled	US	219	Three letters vs non-writers	3 letters, ~15–20 min, 3 weeks	Written; sending encouraged	Yes	Happiness; life satisfaction; low mood	Pre, post
O'Connell et al., 2017	3-arm RCT	Ireland	192	Write + express vs write-only vs events journal	9 entries / 3 weeks	Face-to-face, email, note	Yes	Affect balance; low mood; life satisfaction	Post, 1 month, 3 months
O'Connell et al., 2018	3-arm RCT	Ireland	91	Traditional journal vs interpersonal journal vs control	13 days	Recorded only	n/a	Friendship; life satisfaction	Post, follow-up
Wong et al., 2018	3-arm RCT	US	293	Gratitude letters + counselling vs expressive writing + counselling vs counselling	3 weeks of letters	Written; 23% sent	Yes	Mental health	4 weeks, 12 weeks
Kumar & Epley, 2018	Prediction vs recipient report	US	107 expressers; 80 recipients	Letter sent; no journal arm	1 letter	Email / letter	Yes	Recipient mood, surprise, awkwardness; expresser mood	Immediate
Shin et al., 2020	3-arm RCT	India, Taiwan, US	India 431; TW 112; US 307	Letter to other vs letter to self vs control	1 session	Unsent letter	Yes	State gratitude; elevation; affect	Immediate
Adair et al., 2020	2-arm RCT	US	1,575 health workers	Self- vs other-focused letter	1 letter	Written	Mixed	Exhaustion; happiness; work-life balance	1 week
Walsh, Regan & Lyubomirsky, 2022 (actors/targets)	2x2 RCT	US	369 actors; 247 parent targets	Gratitude vs activities × shared vs unshared	Short written + optional share	Shared or private	Yes (parents)	Mood; closeness; recipient elevation	Immediate
Walsh, Regan, Twenge & Lyubomirsky, 2022	4-arm RCT	US	916 students	Private letter vs 1-to-1 text vs public post vs activity log	4 reps / 1 week	Private / text / social media	Yes	Affect; life satisfaction; connectedness; support	~1 week
Sheldon & Yu, 2021	Multi-arm RCT	US and Taiwan	3 studies	Face-to-face vs phone vs text vs control	1–3 thanking episodes	Spoken or text	Yes	Wellbeing; positive emotion	Immediate to short follow-up
Regan, Walsh & Lyubomirsky, 2023	6-arm RCT	Australia	958 adults	Social/nonsocial letters vs lists vs control	Daily / 1 week	Unsent letters and lists	Letters addressed to known people	Wellbeing; elevation; indebtedness	Post, 1-week follow-up
Dixit & Sinha, 2024	3-arm RCT	India	312 first-year undergraduates	Person of choice vs family member vs typical-day writing	1 session	Written	Yes	Positive and negative affect	Immediate

Study	Design	Country	<i>n</i>	Contrast	Dose	Channel	Recipient known	Outcomes	Timepoints
Choi et al., 2025 (MA)	Meta-analysis	28 countries	24,804	All gratitude practices vs controls	Mixed	Mixed	Mixed	Wellbeing	Mixed
Kirca et al., 2023 (MA)	Meta-analysis	Mostly WEIRD	6,745	Expressed gratitude vs control	Mixed	Mixed	Mixed	Happiness; life satisfaction; positive affect	Mixed

Lerena (2024), a California State University, Sacramento master's thesis ($N = 258$; share versus unshare versus control; null on wellbeing), is grey literature and is not treated as a peer-reviewed trial.

6.3 Forest-plot data table

No new study-level forest plot for expressed-minus-recorded g is presented, because the increment was not pooled. The table below reports the source-meta-analysis row that coaches actually need, then the head-to-head rows in the authors' own metrics.

Source	Contrast	Metric	Estimate	95% CI	<i>k</i> or <i>n</i>	Weight / note
Kirca et al., 2023	Expressed vs neutral control	Hedges g	0.22	0.11 to 0.33	$k = 25$; $N = 6,745$	Primary expressed-vs-control pool
Kirca et al., 2023	Happiness	g	0.16	0.06 to 0.26	$k = 9$	
Kirca et al., 2023	Life satisfaction	g	0.22	0.01 to 0.44	$k = 12$	
Kirca et al., 2023	Positive affect	g	0.21	0.09 to 0.33	$k = 15$	
Kirca et al., 2023	Expressed vs bona fide comparator	g	0.12	-0.02 to 0.26	$k = 14$	Not significant
Kirca et al., 2023	Delivered before post-test	g	0.19	0.06 to 0.33	$k = 8$	Moderator $Q(2) = 0.30, p = .86$
Kirca et al., 2023	Not delivered	g	0.27	0.01 to 0.53	—	Same moderator
Kirca et al., 2023	Delivery optional	g	0.22	0.10 to 0.35	—	Same moderator
Choi et al., 2025	All gratitude practices	g	0.19	0.15 to 0.22	145 papers; $N = 24,804$	Cultural MA
Choi et al., 2025	Expressing gratitude to others	g	0.14	-0.03 to 0.31	Asian slice	$p = .106$, not significant
Choi et al., 2025	India country slice	g	0.18	-0.01 to 0.37	—	$p = .065$
Cregg & Cheavens, 2021	Depression/anxiety, post	g	-0.29	—	$k = 27$; $N = 3,675$	Direction favours gratitude
Cregg & Cheavens, 2021	Depression/anxiety, follow-up	g	-0.23	—	$k = 27$	
Davis et al., 2016	Wellbeing vs alternative activity	d	0.17	0.09 to 0.24	$k = 20$	
Davis et al., 2016	Wellbeing vs psychologically active	d	-0.03	-0.13 to 0.07	$k = 9$	Gratitude does not beat another active practice
Walsh et al., 2022 Affect Sci	Any digital gratitude vs control, PA	partial d	0.29	—	$N = 916$	Private letter included
Walsh et al., 2022 Affect Sci	1-to-1 text vs other gratitude, connectedness	partial d	0.18	—	$N = 916$	Increment is social, not hedonic
O'Connell et al., 2017	Expression arm, affect balance at post	mean diff	+2.30	0.39 to 4.22	$n \approx 63$	$\eta^2 p = .06$
O'Connell et al., 2017	Expression arm, low mood at post	mean diff	-2.97	-4.42 to -1.52	$n \approx 63$	$\eta^2 p = .06$
Kumar & Epley, 2018	Recipient mood minus predicted	d	0.74	—	80 recipients	Recipient pile, not expresser g

6.4 Moderator table

Moderator (pre-specified)	What exists	Direction	Usable for pooling?
In person vs written	Sheldon and Yu (2021): face-to-face, phone and text all beat control and did not differ from each other. Seligman visit is in-person and large at week 1. Walsh text is written-digital and wins on connectedness.	Channel is not the main effect for expresser happiness.	No. Too few head-to-heads.
Recipient known vs stranger	Almost every letter trial uses a known benefactor. Stranger thanks are rare in this literature.	Cannot test.	No.
India or collectivist samples	Shin et al. (2020) India $N = 431$; 2024 Indian undergraduate $N = 312$; Choi et al. (2025) India $g = 0.18$ ns; Asian expression $g = 0.14$ ns; Boehm et al. (2011) smaller life-satisfaction gains for Asian Americans.	Smaller or different-shaped effects. More elevation and indebtedness; less state-gratitude lift.	Narrative only. No adult Indian workplace RCT of visit versus journal.
Delivered vs recorded (the title question)	Kirca moderator null. O'Connell 2017 favours adding expression at week 3. Walsh 2022 finds no extra happiness from sending. Walsh 2022 JOPP sharing raises closeness more than happiness.	Mixed, leaning toward "delivery adds relationship, not extra expresser wellbeing".	No. $k < 5$.

6.5 Heterogeneity

Kirca and colleagues reported $Q(24) = 64.85$, $p < .001$, $I^2 = 63$ per cent, $\tau^2 = 0.04$ for expressed gratitude versus a neutral control. That is moderate-to-substantial heterogeneity. A 95 per cent prediction interval was not printed in the pages we could verify; with $\tau^2 = 0.04$ the next new trial could easily land near zero. Choi and colleagues (2025) likewise found between-country variance and practice-type variance. Length of intervention and distance from baseline to final assessment did not moderate Kirca's pool. Age and percentage female did not moderate it either.

In plain language: gratitude expression is not a precision tool. It is a small average with a wide scatter. Anyone who sells it as a guaranteed mood upgrade has overfitted the press release.

6.6 Publication bias

Kirca and colleagues found a symmetric funnel, Egger $p = .42$, Begg $p = .98$, and no trim-and-fill adjustment for the neutral-control pool. Choi and colleagues (2025) reported that their cultural pool was robust to publication-bias checks and influential cases. That is reassuring for the expressed-versus-control claim. It does not rescue the increment claim. Small head-to-head trials with mixed results are exactly the sort of literature in which file-drawer problems hide. We did not compute a new Egger test on three trials.

6.7 Risk-of-bias summary

Applying RoB 2 domains qualitatively across the adult letter-and-visit trials:

Randomisation. Adequate in the modern Lyubomirsky-lab trials and in O'Connell. Seligman 2005 is a randomised internet study with high early dropout (577 to 411). Toepfer is a controlled student sample.

Deviations from intended intervention. People do not always send the letter. Wong and colleagues reported that only 23 per cent of gratitude-letter clients sent theirs. Any "expressed" arm that does not verify delivery is a messy treatment-as-assigned.

Missing outcome data. O'Connell lost more than half the sample by three months. Walsh and Regan used modern missing-data methods. Older trials often analyse completers.

Outcome measurement. Almost everything is self-report. Participants know they wrote a thank-you. Demand characteristics are not a footnote; they are the weather.

Selection of the reported result. Pre-registration is common only after about 2018. Walsh 2022 Affect Sci was pre-registered. Kirca and Choi were pre-registered meta-analyses. Seligman 2005 was not.

Overall risk of bias for expresser self-reported wellbeing: some concerns to high. Overall risk for recipient immediate mood in Kumar and Epley: some concerns (self-report, incomplete recipient response), but the pattern replicated.

6.8 GRADE table

Outcome	Contrast	Certainty	Why
Expresser wellbeing / positive affect	Expressed gratitude vs neutral control	Moderate, downgraded toward low	Consistent small $g \approx 0.20$ across independent reviews; $I^2 = 63\%$; WEIRD and student-heavy samples; self-report; effects often fade by three months.
Expresser wellbeing	Expressed vs recorded increment	Very low	$k < 5$ clean trials; directions disagree; Kirca delivery moderator null; one grey-literature null.
Relationship quality / connectedness	Delivered vs private	Low	Walsh 2022 Affect Sci and Walsh 2022 JOPP both find small social increments (partial $d \approx 0.16$ – 0.18 ; partial $r \approx .13$ – $.19$). Single-lab cluster. Short follow-up.
Recipient positive mood and surprise	Receiving a letter vs expresser prediction	Moderate for immediate state	Kumar and Epley Experiment 1 plus Experiment 4 plus a documented string of replications. Not a controlled wellbeing trial. Not a workplace sample.
Expresser wellbeing in India	Any gratitude letter	Very low to low	Shin 2020 single-session; 2024 undergraduate affect trial; Choi country slice crossing zero. No published adult Indian RCT of a delivered visit versus a private journal in working professionals.

6.9 Narrative synthesis of the increment

Think of the increment as a product test. The private letter is version one. Delivery is version two. Does version two move the metric that the founder is watching — the writer’s happiness — or a metric the customer is watching — the relationship?

Trial A. O’Connell, O’Shea and Gallagher (2017). One hundred and ninety-two Irish adults, 67 per cent women, mean age 27, 37 per cent already scoring in a range that suggests low mood. Three weeks, three entries a week. Arm one: write about people you are grateful for. Arm two: write, then actually thank someone that week — face to face, email, Facebook or a note — and write down what happened. Arm three: write about ordinary events. At immediate post-test only the expression arm moved. Affect balance rose by 2.30 points. Low-mood scores fell by 2.97. Partial eta-squared was .06 on both — a small-to-medium interaction. At one month both gratitude arms beat the events journal on affect balance. Life satisfaction did not move. The gain in the expression arm was mediated by how often people actually said thank you in their existing relationships. People who started with more low-mood scores seemed to get more of that indirect path. Attrition was ugly by month three. Intention-to-treat models kept the week-three signal and washed out some later ones.

This is the cleanest adult trial of the title question. It says: adding a behavioural thank-you to a social journal helps immediately. It does not say the visit is a wonder drug. It says the extra rep is the expression, not the stationery.

Trial B. Walsh, Regan, Twenge and Lyubomirsky (2022), Affective Science. Nine hundred and sixteen United States undergraduates, ethnically mixed, four conditions, four reps in a week. Private unsent letter. One-to-one text. Public social-media thanks. Daily-activity control. Every gratitude arm beat the control on gratitude (partial $d = 0.36$), positive emotion (0.29), life satisfaction (0.17), elevation (0.35) and connectedness (0.33). The one-to-one text beat the other gratitude arms only on connectedness (0.18) and support (0.16). There was no wellbeing crown for delivery. The unsent letter already did the mood job.

If O’Connell shows the writer who walks across the office to say thank you and feels better for it, Walsh shows the writer who keeps the note on her phone and still feels better. Private writing was not nothing. It was most of the wellbeing effect.

Trial C. Walsh, Regan and Lyubomirsky (2022), Journal of Positive Psychology. A 2×2 with 369 student actors and 247 parent targets. Recalling gratitude raised the actor’s gratitude, mood and satisfaction a little (partial $r = .11$ to $.15$). Sharing it raised state gratitude and closeness (partial $r = .13$ to $.19$). Parents who received the thanks rose in gratitude, indebtedness and elevation (partial $r = .14$ to $.16$). Sharing did not reliably raise the actor’s broader wellbeing. Again: relationship first, happiness increment second.

Trial D. Regan, Walsh and Lyubomirsky (2023). Nine hundred and fifty-eight Australian adults, mean age in the late forties — closer to an EmotionApp professional than a first-year student. Letters were not delivered. Long-form letters beat lists. Social and nonsocial lists did not beat an activity log. Format mattered more than the word “gratitude” printed at the top of a bullet list. Letters also raised indebtedness. That is not a side-effect to hide. It is part of the payload.

Trial E. O’Connell, O’Shea and Gallagher (2018). Ninety-one adults. Traditional journal versus interpersonal journal — both recorded, neither delivered — versus control. The traditional journal beat control on friendship and later life satisfaction. The interpersonal journal did not separate from either arm. Thinking about people, without thanking them, is not automatically better than listing other good things.

Trial F, excluded from weight. Lerena (2024) asked the delivery question in 258 undergraduates and found no group differences on wellbeing, low mood or flourishing. It is a thesis, not a journal article. We record the null so the file drawer is a little less full. We do not pool it.

Channel check. Sheldon and Yu (2021) compared face-to-face, phone and text thanking in United States and Taiwanese samples. All three beat a neutral control. They did not beat each other. The fantasy that only an in-person visit “counts” is not supported. For a Mumbai commute, that is good news.

The visit that started the rumour. Seligman and colleagues (2005) remain the origin story. Five hundred and seventy-seven internet volunteers, 411 of whom completed the follow-ups, six arms. The gratitude visit — write the letter, then deliver it in person to someone never properly thanked — produced the largest immediate rise in happiness and drop in low-mood scores. The rise held at one week and one month. By three months it had gone. Three good things, a recorded practice, was still visible at six months. The visit is a spike. The journal is a slope. Coaches who only quote the spike are quoting the trailer, not the film.

Letters that mostly stayed in the drawer. Wong and colleagues (2018) added gratitude-letter writing to university counselling. Two hundred and ninety-three adults. The gratitude-writing arm reported better mental health than expressive writing and than counselling alone at four and twelve weeks. Only 23 per cent sent the letter. The practice still moved the writer. That is awkward for a theory that delivery is the active ingredient. It is convenient for a WhatsApp programme that cannot force a read receipt.

Workplace-adjacent letter. Adair and colleagues (2020) gave 1,575 healthcare workers one letter prompt, self-focused or other-focused. Both arms improved exhaustion, happiness and work-life balance at one week. The target of the sentence mattered less than the fact of writing.

Expresser *g* and recipient experience are different products. Mixing them is how marketing departments get sacked by methodologists.

Kumar and Epley (2018), Experiment 1: 107 MBA expressers wrote a letter to someone they had not properly thanked. Eighty recipients answered. Expressers themselves felt better after sending (mood $d = 1.09$ versus their own baseline). They still undervalued the recipient. Recipients were more positive than predicted ($d = 0.74$), more surprised to receive the letter ($d = 0.68$), more surprised by the content ($d = 0.40$), and less awkward than predicted ($d = 0.32$). Experiment 4 and a later string of replications, archived on OSF, repeated the gap. Expected awkwardness predicted whether people wanted to send the letter at all. The barrier is not ingratitude. The barrier is a bad forecast.

A Chennai analyst drafts a thank-you to her old team lead and stops at send. “She already knows. She will cringe. I will sound wet.” Two guesses, stacked: what the other person thinks, and how it will go. The data say the recipient’s mood goes up and the cringe goes down. So notice the forecast as a forecast, and send. You do not wait for it to improve. You send because thanks is what you mean, not because the prediction interval includes zero awkwardness.

6.10 Recipient outcomes, kept separate

6.11 India and collectivist samples

We did not pool recipient wellbeing as if it were an intervention trial. Kumar and Epley did not randomise recipients to gratitude versus a journal. They measured a prediction error. It is a strong prediction error. It is not a Hedges g for recipient flourishing at six months.

Shin and colleagues (2020) is the most important India-facing trial in this file. Four hundred and thirty-one Indian adults, 112 Taiwanese, 307 United States, one writing session, letters not sent. United States participants who wrote to a benefactor rose in state gratitude relative to control. Indian and Taiwanese participants did not. Indian participants who wrote to a benefactor reported more elevation and less negative affect than Indian controls. The emotion that moved was not the one on the package label.

Dixit and Sinha (2024) randomised 312 Indian first-year undergraduates (mean age 18.6) to write about a typical day, to write gratitude toward a person of their choice, or to write gratitude toward an immediate family member. Person of choice raised positive affect and lowered negative affect (partial $\eta^2 = 0.04$). Family member did neither. In a culture where family is the default target of thanks, that result is a warning label. Mandating thanks to parents, in-laws or reporting managers is not “localisation”. It is a different intervention, and in this trial it was the one that failed.

Choi and colleagues (2025), in *PNAS*, put country on the table. Across 145 papers, 163 samples, 727 effect sizes and 24,804 people in 28 countries, gratitude practices as a family produced $g = 0.19$ [0.15, 0.22]. The India slice was $g = 0.18$ [-0.01, 0.37], $p = .065$. Among Asian samples, expressing gratitude to others was $g = 0.14$ [-0.03, 0.31], $p = .106$. The same paper reported no significant country-level effects in France, India, Japan, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom. That is not “gratitude does not work in Asia”. That is “we do not yet have a precise Indian estimate, and the point estimate is smaller than the brochure”.

Boehm, Lyubomirsky and Sheldon (2011) had already shown smaller life-satisfaction gains from weekly gratitude letters among Asian Americans than among Anglo-Americans. Layous, Lee, Choi and Lyubomirsky (2013) found South Korean participants benefited less from gratitude letters than United States participants. The pattern is older than this review.

CTRI contained no completed adult Indian RCT that compared a delivered gratitude visit with a private journal in working professionals. ClinicalTrials.gov threw up collectivist-culture cancer-care feasibility work and youth multi-component programmes. Those are not this question.

The India gap is not a rhetorical flourish. It is an empty cell in the evidence table.

07

Discussion

PULL QUOTE

Expressers underestimated how good recipients would feel by $d = 0.74$.

7.1 What the number means

The number most people will quote from this paper is 0.22. They should quote it with its passport. It is the effect of writing gratitude to a person — sent or unsent — versus a neutral control, across 25 randomised samples and 6,745 adults. It is small. Cohen would have called it small. A coach should call it a nudge. In an Indian office, a g of 0.22 is the difference between a meeting that ends with a specific thank-you and a meeting that ends with “noted”. You would not bet a quarterly bonus on it. You would also be foolish to ignore a reliable nudge that costs ten minutes and no rupees.

The number this title wanted — expressed minus recorded — does not exist as a responsible pool. The closest verified substitute is Kirca’s delivery moderator: $g = 0.19$ when the person had already been thanked, $g = 0.27$ when they had not, difference undetectable ($p = .86$). Read that again, slowly. The unsent letters were not the weak arm. If anything the point estimate favoured keeping the letter. Do not over-read a non-significant moderator. Do not under-read it either. After 25 samples, delivery is not emerging as the secret sauce for the writer’s wellbeing.

Head-to-head trials add texture rather than a new headline number. O’Connell (2017) says that turning the journal into a weekly thank-you helps immediately, especially if you actually do the thank-you. Walsh (2022) says the private letter already buys the mood, and the text buys the relationship. Regan (2023) says a letter beats a list even when nobody else reads it. Seligman (2005) says the visit is a spike that fades. Three good things, which is recorded gratitude, is the tortoise.

So the stand-up version, the one you could tell in a canteen:

Writing it works a bit.

Sending it works a bit for you and more for them.

Sending it does not double your happiness.

Pretending the journal is a waste of time is how people talk when they have only read the trailer of Seligman 2005.

7.2 A scene, a model, and a product lesson

Picture the two moments. A sales manager in Kolkata writes four lines to the colleague who covered her accounts during a family wedding. She feels lighter before anyone reads them. Then she sends them. That second act changes the relationship; the colleague rings back. It does not always change the manager’s own wellbeing score. Coaches who sell the second act as a bigger boost for the writer are selling a different study than the one in the journal.

In machine-learning terms the private letter is training. You update the weights on “this person mattered”. Delivery is deployment. Deployment has a different loss function. It includes the other person’s state. Kumar and Epley measured that test-set performance. Expressers are poorly calibrated. They predict awkwardness the way a founder predicts churn: too high, and then they never ship.

Put it in plain coaching terms. Writing privately changes how you feel about the moment. Sending changes the moment itself: it tests your forecast against a real person, who usually answers more kindly than you predicted. When embarrassment says hide the letter, send a shorter one — two lines on WhatsApp instead of a page. If “being the kind of colleague who thanks people” matters to you, the doing is the point, not the predicted dopamine.

Entrepreneurship has the rudest translation. An unsent letter is a pitch deck. A sent text is a customer shipment. Founders overestimate how awkward the demo will be and underestimate how glad the user is that someone finally said the thing. That is Kumar and Epley in a hoodie.

7.3 Limitations

This is an update-and-gap review, not a dual-screened de novo meta-analysis. Flow counts are reconstructed. We did not re-extract every Kirca study-level g from raw means. We did not compute a new REML model, a new prediction interval, or a new trim-and-fill. We did not have access to every paywalled table. Where a number could not be verified, it was left out.

The increment literature is one-lab-heavy. A striking fraction of the best modern trials come from Lyubomirsky's group and from O'Connell's Irish programme. Replication outside those clusters is thinner than the citation counts suggest.

Almost every outcome is a questionnaire. Nobody measured promotions, retention, sleep actigraphy or cortisol in these letter trials in a way we could trust for this review. Recipient samples are small and selected: people whose expressers were willing to hand over an email address.

Dose is all over the place. One session of fifteen minutes. Three letters in three weeks. Four texts in a week. Six weekly letters. Nine journal entries. Comparing them as if they were one drug at one milligram is how narratives get drunk.

Follow-up is short. Seligman's three-month fade is still the honest long view. Anyone promising a lasting personality change from one Thursday thank-you is writing fiction.

India is under-sampled, under-followed, and over-generalised from undergraduates and single sessions.

7.4 What this means for an Indian workplace programme

Build the rep for the phone that is already in the person's hand. Picture a Friday afternoon in a Gurugram office. A WhatsApp prompt arrives: "Who made your week easier? Ten minutes. Write it to them." An accounts executive picks the colleague who untangled her tax file. Nobody told her to thank her manager or her mother. That is the version the trials actually support: a ten-minute note, once a week, to a person of the writer's choice. Under her four sentences sit two buttons, Keep and Send. She may stop at Keep; private writing already moves affect. If she taps Send, the note goes one-to-one on WhatsApp, the closest tested channel to extra connectedness. No public thank-you wall unless the team asks for one; Walsh's public arm was not the winner. Watch indebtedness in hierarchy. In Indian samples, thanks aimed at family, or at people who "had to" help, can land as debt. The person-of-choice prompt protects against that. Count reps, not tears. One cinematic visit is a spike. Twelve short notes are a programme. Keep the copy in her language and the data in India. When a note turns into grief, rage or a relationship she cannot safely touch, a human coach takes over. This is coaching, not a clinic.

7.5 Research gaps, with the India gap named

We need five things this literature does not yet have.

An adult Indian RCT, pre-registered on CTRI, that randomises working professionals to (a) a private gratitude note, (b) the same note sent on WhatsApp to a person of choice, and (c) an active control such as a work-events log, with outcomes at week 1, week 4 and month 3, in more than one Indian language.

Recipient outcomes in those same trials, not only expresser questionnaires.

A clean test of known-versus-stranger and peer-versus-manager targets, because the 2024 undergraduate family-member arm failed.

Independent-lab replications of Walsh 2022 and O'Connell 2017, with RoB 2-friendly delivery checks (a timestamped send, not a self-report).

Enough head-to-head trials — five or more, with extractable g — that the increment can finally be pooled. Until then, anyone publishing an "expressed-minus-recorded g " is guessing.

The India gap is explicit. There is no published, completed, adult, working-professional, India-resident randomised trial of a delivered gratitude visit versus a private gratitude journal. Shin (2020) is a single unsent session. Dixit and Sinha (2024) is an undergraduate affect trial, not a workplace and not a delivery test. Choi and colleagues (2025) found no significant country-level effect in India. Programmes that claim an India-specific effect size for thank-you visits are ahead of the evidence.

08

FAQ

Q1 Does sending a thank-you beat writing one and keeping it?

Not on the writer's happiness, not with any number we can pool. Across 25 trials the delivery moderator was null ($p = .86$). One Irish trial favoured adding a weekly thank-you at week 3. A 916-person United States trial found the private letter already lifted mood.

Q2 So is the gratitude journal a waste?

No. Recorded gratitude versus doing nothing is a small effect in the same neighbourhood as $g = 0.19$. Lists that only name people or objects, with no sentences, looked weak in 958 Australian adults. Write in sentences. That is the format finding, not a delivery finding.

Q3 Will the other person find it awkward?

Less than you think. In Kumar and Epley's first experiment, expressers overestimated awkwardness at $d = 0.32$ and underestimated the recipient's positive mood at $d = 0.74$. The forecast is biased. The recipient's face is usually kinder than the forecast.

Q4 Should Indian teams thank their parents and bosses on a schedule?

Dixit and Sinha (2024) randomised 312 Indian undergraduates: person-of-choice thanks moved affect (partial $\eta^2 = 0.04$); family-member thanks did not. Hierarchy plus indebtedness is a live wire. Let the writer pick the person. Do not pick for them.

Q5 How often should we do this?

Seligman's single visit faded by three months. Toepfer used three letters in three weeks. Walsh used four short reps in one week. A weekly ten-minute rep, optional send, for eight to twelve weeks, is a coaching dose. It is not a cure and it is not a once-a-year speech.

09

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NOTE

EmotionApp is a non-clinical emotional-fitness coaching platform. This paper describes practices, techniques and coaching. It is not therapy, treatment, diagnosis or medical advice.

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