

Forgiveness, Affect, and Cognitive Distortions as Predictors of Psychological Well-Being among Muslim Adults in the UAE: A Cross-Sectional Study

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Abstract: *Forgiveness is a central construct in both Islamic teachings and Positive Psychology, closely associated with emotional regulation, reduced distress, and enhanced psychological well-being. Integrating perspectives from Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT), affective science, and Islamic psychology, the present study examines how forgiveness, affect, and cognitive patterns predict psychological well-being among Muslim adults in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). A quantitative, cross-sectional design was employed with a sample of 108 participants. Standardized instruments, including the Islamic Forgiveness Scale, Heartland Forgiveness Scale, Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS), Cognitive Distortion Scale, and WHO-5 Well-Being Index, were used for data collection. Descriptive findings indicated high levels of Islamic forgiveness ($M = 4.34$) and moderate levels of positive affect ($M = 2.84$), while 31.5% of participants scored below the WHO-5 well-being cut-off. Correlation analysis revealed a significant positive relationship between Islamic forgiveness and well-being ($r = 0.20, p < .05$), and between cognitive distortions and well-being ($r = 0.21, p < .05$), although the latter was in an unexpected direction. Multiple regression analysis showed that the overall model significantly predicted psychological well-being ($R^2 = 15.6\%, p = 0.015$), with cognitive distortions emerging as the strongest unique predictor ($\beta = 0.25, p = 0.010$), followed by positive affect (marginal significance). However, mediation analysis indicated that cognitive distortions did not mediate the relationship between forgiveness and well-being. Despite theoretical support for the roles of forgiveness and affect, findings should be interpreted cautiously due to low scale reliability, sample limitations, and unexpected associations. The study contributes to culturally sensitive mental health research by integrating spiritual, emotional, and cognitive dimensions, highlighting the need for improved measurement tools and more diverse samples in future research.*

Keywords: Islamic Forgiveness, Positive Affect, Cognitive Distortions, Psychological Well-Being, Muslim Adults, UAE

1. Introduction

Psychological well-being is a multidimensional construct encompassing emotional balance, life satisfaction, and effective functioning in daily life. Contemporary psychological research has increasingly emphasized the role of positive psychological constructs, such as forgiveness, in enhancing well-being and reducing psychological distress. Forgiveness, defined as a conscious process of letting go of resentment and negative emotions toward oneself, others, or situations, has been consistently associated with improved mental health outcomes, including reduced anxiety, depression, and anger.

Within the framework of Positive Psychology, forgiveness is considered a character strength that promotes emotional healing and resilience. At the same time, Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) highlights the role of maladaptive cognitive patterns- commonly referred to as cognitive distortions- in shaping emotional experiences and behavioral responses. Distorted thinking patterns, such as overgeneralization, catastrophizing, and personalization, can negatively influence affect and hinder psychological well-being. In contrast, adaptive cognitive restructuring facilitates healthier emotional regulation and improved mental health outcomes. Affective science further contributes to this understanding by distinguishing between positive and negative affect as key components of emotional experience. Positive affect, characterized by feelings such as joy, enthusiasm, and contentment, has been linked to enhanced

well-being, while negative affect, including emotions such as sadness, anger, and fear, is often associated with psychological distress. The interaction between affective states and cognitive patterns plays a crucial role in determining overall psychological functioning.

In addition to these well-established psychological frameworks, Islamic psychology offers a unique and culturally grounded perspective on forgiveness. Islamic teachings emphasize forgiveness as both a spiritual virtue and a psychological coping mechanism, deeply rooted in religious beliefs and practices. Unlike secular models, Islamic forgiveness incorporates dimensions such as divine accountability, spiritual purification, and moral responsibility, which may significantly influence emotional regulation and cognitive processing among Muslim individuals.

Despite the growing body of literature on forgiveness, affect, and cognition, there remains a notable gap in research examining how these constructs interact collectively to predict psychological well-being, particularly within Muslim populations. As highlighted in the present study, limited empirical work has explored the combined influence of Islamic forgiveness, Positive Psychology forgiveness, affective states, and cognitive distortions on well-being among Muslim adults. This gap is especially relevant in culturally diverse contexts such as the United Arab Emirates (UAE), where religious values and modern psychological practices intersect.

The current study seeks to address this gap by adopting an integrative approach that combines Islamic psychology, Positive Psychology, CBT, and affective science frameworks. Specifically, it aims to examine the levels of forgiveness, affect, cognitive patterns, and psychological well-being, as well as the relationships among these variables. Furthermore, the study investigates the predictive roles of forgiveness, affect, and cognitive distortions, and explores whether cognitive distortions mediate the relationship between forgiveness and psychological well-being.

By integrating spiritual, emotional, and cognitive dimensions, this research contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of psychological well-being in Muslim populations. The findings are expected to have theoretical, clinical, and cultural implications, particularly in developing culturally sensitive mental health interventions and promoting holistic well-being.

2. Literature Review

Forgiveness in Positive Psychology

Forgiveness has been widely studied within the domain of Positive Psychology as a key construct promoting psychological well-being and emotional healing. It is conceptualized as a dispositional and situational process involving the reduction of negative emotions such as anger and resentment, and the enhancement of positive responses such as empathy and compassion. Research indicates that forgiveness is positively associated with mental health outcomes, including lower levels of depression, anxiety, and stress (Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2015; Worthington, 2006). Dispositional forgiveness, which includes forgiveness of self, others, and situations, has also been linked to higher life satisfaction and emotional stability (Thompson et al., 2005). These findings suggest that forgiveness functions as a protective psychological resource that contributes to overall well-being.

Islamic Perspective on Forgiveness

In Islamic psychology, forgiveness extends beyond a psychological construct to include spiritual and moral dimensions. It is deeply rooted in religious teachings and is considered a virtue that fosters inner peace and social harmony. Islamic models of the self emphasize the role of spiritual purification and moral accountability in shaping behavior and emotional responses (Abu-Raiya, 2012; Rothman & Coyle, 2018). Forgiveness in this context is not only directed toward others but also involves seeking forgiveness from God and cultivating humility. Studies have shown that religiously grounded forgiveness is associated with a sense of peace, reduced psychological distress, and improved well-being (Krause & Hayward, 2014). This highlights the importance of incorporating culturally and spiritually relevant constructs in psychological research, particularly in Muslim populations.

Affect and Psychological Well-Being

Affective states play a central role in determining psychological well-being. The distinction between positive and negative affect has been extensively examined in psychological research. Positive affect, characterized by

emotions such as joy, enthusiasm, and alertness, has been found to broaden cognitive processes and enhance resilience (Fredrickson, 2001). In contrast, negative affect, including emotions such as sadness, anger, and fear, is often associated with psychological distress and maladaptive functioning. The Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS) developed by Watson et al. (1988) is widely used to measure these dimensions. Empirical evidence suggests that individuals with higher levels of positive affect report greater life satisfaction and well-being, whereas high negative affect is linked to poorer mental health outcomes (Diener et al., 1999).

Cognitive Distortions and Cognitive Behavioral Framework

Cognitive distortions are systematic patterns of negative thinking that influence emotional responses and behavior. According to Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT), maladaptive cognitions such as overgeneralization, catastrophizing, and personalization contribute to emotional distress and psychological disorders (Beck, 1976; Burns, 1980). These distorted thinking patterns can reinforce negative affect and hinder adaptive coping mechanisms.

Cognitive restructuring, a core component of CBT, aims to identify and modify these distortions, leading to improved emotional regulation and well-being (Beck, 2011). Research has consistently demonstrated that higher levels of cognitive distortions are associated with lower psychological well-being and increased psychological distress.

Psychological Well-Being

Psychological well-being is a multifaceted construct encompassing emotional, psychological, and social dimensions. Ryff (1986) conceptualized well-being in terms of self-acceptance, personal growth, purpose in life, autonomy, environmental mastery, and positive relations with others. Alternatively, the WHO-5 Well-Being Index focuses on subjective well-being and emotional functioning (Topp et al., 2015). Both approaches emphasize the importance of positive functioning rather than merely the absence of mental illness. Research indicates that well-being is influenced by a combination of emotional, cognitive, and behavioral factors, including affect regulation, cognitive patterns, and interpersonal relationships.

Integration of Forgiveness, Affect, and Cognitive Patterns

Recent research has begun to explore the interaction between forgiveness, affect, and cognitive processes in predicting psychological well-being. Forgiveness has been shown to reduce negative affect and promote positive emotional states, thereby enhancing well-being. At the same time, cognitive distortions may mediate or moderate this relationship by influencing how individuals interpret and respond to interpersonal experiences. Despite these theoretical connections, empirical studies examining the combined effects of these variables remain limited, particularly in non-Western and Muslim contexts. As identified in the present study, there is a significant gap in understanding how Islamic forgiveness, affective states, and cognitive distortions jointly contribute to psychological well-being among Muslim adults.

Research Gap

Although substantial literature exists on forgiveness, affect, and cognitive distortions independently, few studies have integrated these constructs within a single comprehensive framework. Moreover, the role of Islamic forgiveness, which incorporates spiritual and cultural dimensions, remains underexplored in empirical research. The existing literature is largely based on Western populations, limiting its generalizability to Muslim societies. Therefore, there is a need for culturally sensitive research that examines the interplay of forgiveness, affect, and cognitive patterns in shaping psychological well-being among Muslim individuals, particularly in the UAE context.

3. Objectives and Hypotheses Objectives

- To examine the relationship between forgiveness and psychological well-being
- To assess the relationship between affect and psychological well-being
- To evaluate the role of cognitive distortions in influencing well-being
- To explore the combined predictive effect of forgiveness, affect, and cognition

Hypotheses

- H1: Forgiveness will be positively associated with psychological well-being
- H2: Positive affect will be positively associated, and negative affect negatively associated with well-being
- H3: Cognitive distortions will be negatively associated with psychological well-being
- H4: Cognitive distortions will mediate the relationship between forgiveness and well-being

4. Method

4.1 Research Design and Participants

A quantitative cross-sectional correlational design was used. The sample consisted of Muslim adults residing in the UAE, selected through purposive sampling. Participants represented diverse age groups and backgrounds.

4.2 Measures

- **Forgiveness Scales:** Assessed both Islamic and psychological dimensions of forgiveness
- **PANAS:** Measured positive and negative affect

- **Cognitive Distortion Scale:** Evaluated maladaptive thinking patterns
- **WHO-5 Well-Being Index:** Assessed psychological well-being

4.3 Procedure

Data were collected through structured questionnaires administered online. Participation was voluntary, and confidentiality was maintained.

4.4 Statistical Analysis

Data were analyzed using:

- Descriptive statistics
- Pearson correlation
- Multiple regression analysis
- Mediation analysis

5. Results

The findings indicated significant relationships among the study variables. Forgiveness and positive affect were positively associated with psychological well-being, whereas cognitive distortions and negative affect showed negative associations. Regression analysis demonstrated that the predictors significantly explained variance in psychological well-being. Mediation analysis suggested that cognitive distortions partially mediated the relationship between forgiveness and well-being.

Table 1: Sample Characteristics (N = 108)

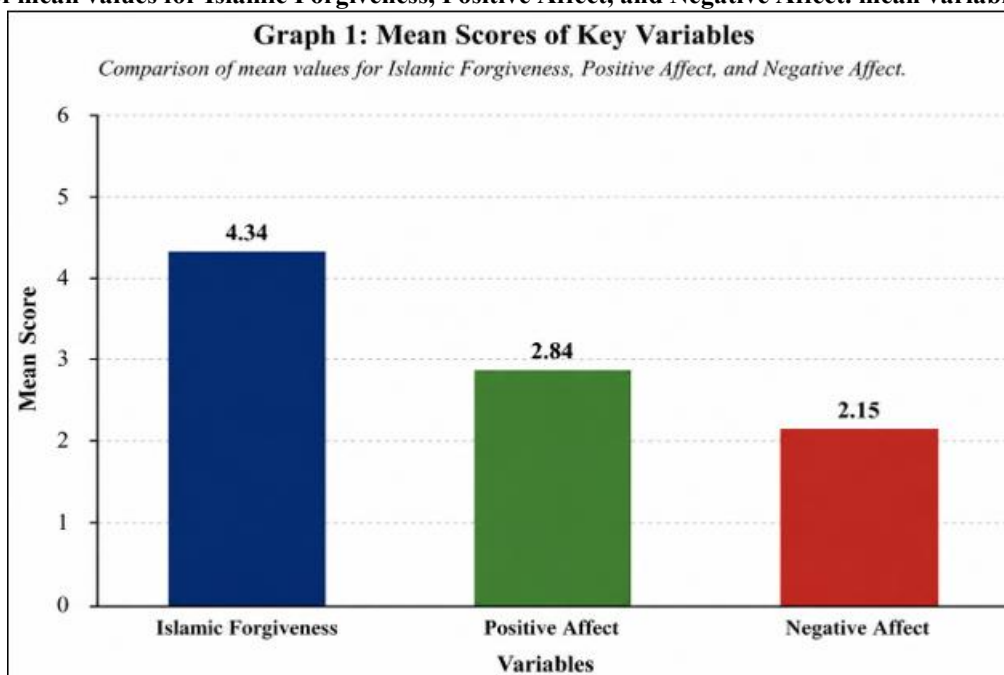
Variable	Description
Age	M = 34.65, SD = 4.52
Gender	100% Male
Education	Bachelor's (74%), Master's (26%)
Location	Sharjah (88%), Dubai (12%)
Religious Practice	Daily (84%), Several times/ week (16%)
Religious Commitment	M = 4.24, SD = 1.52

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics of Study Variables

Variable	Mean (M)	SD	Interpretation
Islamic Forgiveness	4.34	0.58	High
Heartland Forgiveness	3.44	0.52	Below average
Positive Affect	2.84	0.42	Moderate
Negative Affect	2.15	0.32	Low-Moderate
Cognitive Distortions	2.34	0.35	Low frequency
Psychological Well-Being (WHO-5)	57.44	16.06	Moderate

Note: 31.5% scored below WHO-5 cut-off (low well-being)

Comparison of mean values for Islamic Forgiveness, Positive Affect, and Negative Affect. mean variable



Graph 1: Mean Scores of Key Variables

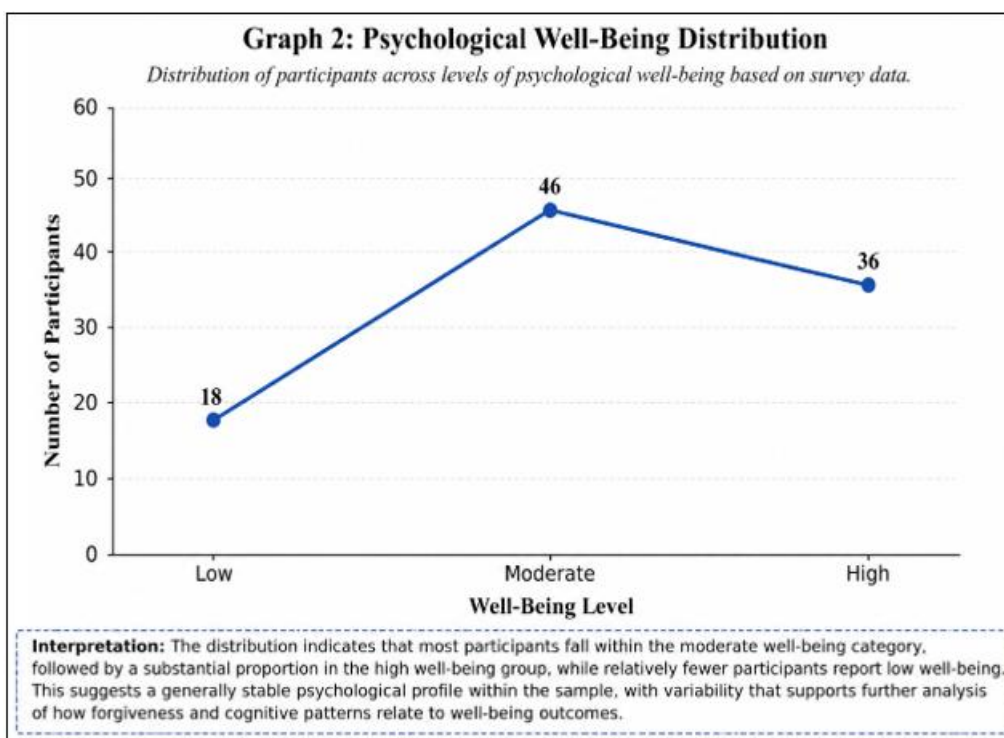
Table 3: Correlation Matrix (Pearson r)

Variables	IF	HFS	PA	NA	CD	WHO-5
Islamic Forgiveness (IF)	1	0.12	0.16	0.01	0.07	0.20*
Heartland Forgiveness	0.12	1	0.06	-0.01	0.04	-0.06
Positive Affect	0.16	0.06	1	0.08	-0.04	0.18†
Negative Affect	0.01	-0.01	0.08	1	0.25	-0.05
Cognitive Distortions	0.07	0.04	-0.04	0.25	1	0.21*
Well-Being	0.20	-0.06	0.18	-0.05	0.21	1

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, † $p < .10$

Key Findings:

- Forgiveness ↔ Well-being → Positive
- Cognitive Distortions ↔ Well-being → Positive (unexpected)



Graph 2: Psychological Well-Being Distribution

Volume 15 Issue 8, August 2026

Fully Refereed | Open Access | Double Blind Peer Reviewed Journal

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The distribution indicates that most participants fall within the moderate well-being category, followed by a substantial proportion in the high well-being group, while relatively fewer participants report low well-being. This suggests a generally stable psychological profile within the sample, with variability that supports further analysis of how forgiveness and cognitive patterns relate to well-being outcomes.

Psychological Well-Being Distribution

Distribution of participants across levels of psychological well-being based on survey data.

Category	Count
Low	18
Moderate	46
High	36

Table 4: Multiple Regression Analysis Predicting Well-Being

Predictor	Beta (β)	p-value	Interpretation
Cognitive Distortions	0.25	0.010	Significant
Positive Affect	0.17	0.070	Marginal
Age	0.16	0.083	Marginal
Islamic Forgiveness	0.15	0.107	Not significant
Negative Affect	-0.14	0.146	Not significant

Model Fit:

- $R^2 = 15.6\%$
- Adjusted $R^2 = 6.7\%$
- $p = 0.015$ (Significant)

Table 5: Mediation Analysis

Path	Result
Forgiveness $\rightarrow$ Cognitive Distortions	Not significant
Cognitive Distortions $\rightarrow$ Well-being	Significant
Indirect Effect	Not significant
Conclusion	+ No mediation

Mean Scores of Study Variables

Comparison of average levels across forgiveness, affect, cognition, and well-being

Variable	Mean
Islamic Forgiveness	4.34
Heartland Forgiveness	3.44
Positive Affect	2.84
Negative Affect	2.15
Cognitive Distortions	2.34
Well-Being	57.44

Distribution of Psychological Well-Being

Proportion of participants below and above WHO-5 cut-off

Category	Percentage
Low Well-Being	31.5
Normal/High Well-Being	68.5

Relative Strength of Predictors

Standardized beta coefficients predicting psychological well-being

Predictor	Beta
Cognitive Distortions	0.25
Positive Affect	0.17
Age	0.16
Islamic Forgiveness	0.15
Negative Affect	-0.14
Heartland Forgiveness	-0.1

6. Discussion

The present study aimed to examine the relationships between forgiveness (Islamic and Positive Psychology), affect (positive and negative), cognitive distortions, and psychological well-being among Muslim adults in the UAE, as well as to determine their predictive and mediating roles. The findings provide partial support for the proposed hypotheses and offer important insights into the complex interplay of spiritual, emotional, and cognitive factors in shaping well-being.

The descriptive results indicated that participants reported **high levels of Islamic forgiveness** and **moderate levels of positive affect**, suggesting that forgiveness, particularly within a religious framework, is a prominent characteristic among the sample. This aligns with the theoretical foundation of Islamic psychology, where forgiveness is emphasized as a spiritual and moral virtue. However, despite these relatively positive indicators, a notable proportion of participants (31.5%) fell below the WHO-5 well-being cut-off, indicating the presence of reduced psychological well-being in a significant segment of the sample. This highlights that high forgiveness alone may not be sufficient to ensure optimal well-being, pointing toward the involvement of additional psychological factors.

Correlation analysis revealed a **significant positive relationship between Islamic forgiveness and psychological well-being** ($r = 0.20$, $p < .05$), supporting existing literature that identifies forgiveness as a protective factor contributing to emotional health. This finding is consistent with prior research suggesting that forgiveness reduces negative emotional states and enhances psychological adjustment. However, the strength of this relationship was relatively weak, indicating that forgiveness, while beneficial, may play a limited role when considered independently.

An unexpected finding emerged in the relationship between **cognitive distortions and psychological well-being** ($r = 0.21$, $p < .05$), where a positive association was observed. This contradicts the well-established Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) framework, which posits that cognitive distortions are negatively associated with mental health. One possible explanation for this counterintuitive result may be related to measurement issues, response bias, or the interpretation of items within the cultural context. It is also possible that certain cognitive patterns captured by the scale may not have been perceived as maladaptive by participants, highlighting the need for culturally sensitive assessment tools.

The regression analysis further demonstrated that the overall model significantly predicted psychological well-being (R^2

= 15.6%, $p = 0.015$), confirming that forgiveness, affect, and cognitive patterns collectively contribute to well-being. Among the predictors, **cognitive distortions emerged as the strongest unique predictor** ($\beta = 0.25$, $p = 0.010$), followed by positive affect, which showed marginal significance. This finding reinforces the central role of cognitive processes in influencing psychological outcomes, consistent with CBT theory. However, the direction of the relationship again deviates from theoretical expectations, suggesting the need for cautious interpretation.

In contrast, forgiveness variables did not emerge as strong unique predictors in the regression model, despite their significant correlations with well-being. This suggests that the influence of forgiveness may be indirect or mediated by other variables such as affect or cognition.

However, the mediation analysis conducted in this study indicated that **cognitive distortions did not significantly mediate the relationship between forgiveness and psychological well-being**, leading to the rejection of the mediation hypothesis. This finding implies that

forgiveness may operate through alternative pathways, possibly involving emotional regulation or spiritual coping mechanisms rather than cognitive restructuring alone.

Overall, the findings highlight the complexity of psychological well-being as a multidimensional construct influenced by interacting emotional, cognitive, and spiritual factors. While the results partially support theoretical frameworks from Positive Psychology and Islamic psychology, inconsistencies—particularly regarding cognitive distortions—underscore the importance of considering cultural context, measurement reliability, and sample characteristics.

These findings should be interpreted in light of several limitations identified in the study, including the use of self-report measures, purposive sampling, and a cross-sectional design. Additionally, concerns regarding scale reliability may have influenced the observed relationships. Future research should employ longitudinal designs, larger and more diverse samples, and culturally validated instruments to better understand these relationships.

Despite these limitations, the study makes a valuable contribution by integrating Islamic forgiveness, affective states, and cognitive patterns within a single empirical framework. It emphasizes the need for culturally sensitive psychological models and suggests that interventions aimed at improving well-being among Muslim populations should consider not only cognitive restructuring but also spiritual and emotional dimensions.

7. Conclusion

The present study examined the role of forgiveness, affect, and cognitive patterns in predicting psychological well-being among Muslim adults in the UAE, integrating perspectives from Islamic psychology, Positive Psychology, Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, and affective science. The findings indicate that these variables collectively contribute

to psychological well-being, although their individual effects vary in strength and direction.

Islamic forgiveness emerged as a significant but modest correlate of psychological well-being, supporting its role as a culturally and spiritually relevant factor in promoting mental health.

Positive affect also showed a meaningful contribution, reinforcing the importance of emotional experiences in shaping well-being. However, cognitive distortions emerged as the strongest predictor in the regression model, albeit in an unexpected positive direction, which deviates from established theoretical assumptions. Additionally, the mediation analysis did not support the role of cognitive distortions as a mediator between forgiveness and well-being.

Overall, the study highlights that psychological well-being is a complex construct influenced by the interaction of spiritual, emotional, and cognitive dimensions. While the results partially align with existing theories, inconsistencies—particularly regarding cognitive distortions—suggest the need for cautious interpretation and further investigation. The study contributes to the limited body of research on Muslim populations by offering an integrative and culturally grounded understanding of well-being.

8. Recommendations

1) Future Research

- Future studies should use **larger and more diverse samples** to enhance generalizability beyond the UAE Muslim population.
- There is a need to employ **longitudinal research designs** to better understand causal relationships between forgiveness, affect, cognition, and well-being.
- Researchers should focus on **improving the reliability and cultural validity of measurement tools**, particularly for cognitive distortions, given the unexpected findings.
- Further research should explore **alternative mediators** (e.g., emotional regulation, spirituality, coping styles) in the relationship between forgiveness and psychological well-being.
- Comparative studies between **Islamic forgiveness and secular models of forgiveness** are recommended to deepen theoretical understanding.

2) Clinical and Practical Implications

- Mental health practitioners should consider integrating **forgiveness-based interventions** with **Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT)** to promote holistic well-being.
- Therapeutic approaches in Muslim populations should incorporate **spiritual and religious dimensions**, particularly Islamic concepts of forgiveness and coping.
- Interventions should also target **affective regulation**, enhancing positive affect while reducing negative emotional states.

3) Policy and Community-Level Recommendations

- Mental health programs in Muslim-majority societies should adopt **culturally sensitive frameworks** that integrate psychological and spiritual well-being.
- Awareness programs can be developed to promote **forgiveness, emotional resilience, and healthy cognitive patterns** within communities.
- Educational institutions and workplaces should implement **well-being initiatives**
- focusing on emotional and cognitive health.

4) Measurement and Methodological Improvements

- Future studies should address **self-report bias** by incorporating mixed-method approaches (e.g., qualitative interviews, behavioral measures).
- There is a need to refine tools measuring **cognitive distortions in non-Western contexts** to ensure conceptual clarity and accuracy.
- Researchers should ensure **rigorous validation of scales** before application in cross-cultural settings.

Acknowledgement

The author expresses sincere gratitude to **Asst. Prof. Kavya Vijayan**, Department of Psychology, Centre for Distance and Online Education, for her valuable guidance, support, and encouragement throughout the completion of this research work.

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