

# Examining the Mediating Role of Forgiveness in the Relationship between University Students' Belonging and Flourishing

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With the development of the field of positive psychology, research on how positive concepts of human nature predict mental health has become widespread. A concept that explain positive mental health development is flourishing. This study examines the mediating role of forgiveness in the relationship between belongingness and flourishing among university students. A total of 381 university students (211 females and 170 males, Mage = 21.12 ± 2.23) participated in the study and completed the Flourishing Scale, General Belongingness Scale, Heartland Forgiveness Scale, and Personal Information Form. Hayes (2018) developed Model 4 within the SPSS macro PROCESS v4 to examine the mediating role of forgiveness between belongingness and flourishing. The results of the research model indicated a significant and positive link among belongingness, forgiveness, and flourishing. According to the research model, belongingness is predicted to flourish through the partial mediation of forgiveness. These findings indicate that belongingness improves university students' forgiveness, thereby enhancing their flourishing. In addition, belongingness helps university students flourish. In the Discussion and Conclusion section, explanations related to the research findings, limitations of the study, and suggestions for future research were provided.

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**Keywords:** Flourishing, belongingness, forgiveness, university student

## INTRODUCTION

In the studies conducted in the field of positive psychology, it is generally seen that there are explanations about what a good life is. Some of these explanations are based on the hedonistic perspective, which dates back to ancient Greek philosophers. According to this perspective, the individual should avoid actions that cause discomfort and engage in actions that provide pleasure. In other words, according to this approach, an individual will have a good life if they try to enjoy every moment they are in and avoid painful situations. In recent years, according to the theory of positive psychology, this perspective has proven insufficient in explicating what constitutes a good life (Ryff, 1989). Deriving pleasure from every moment of an individual's life is deemed unrealistic, and life is not solely comprised of discrete moments but rather possesses a holistic structure. In this regard, especially since the 2000s, new concepts have emerged that seek to elucidate individuals' well-being as an alternative to hedonistic perspectives (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Some of these concepts include flourishing, psychological well-being, psychosocial well-being, psychological wellness, and happiness. A common feature among these concepts is their adherence to a eudaimonic perspective rather than a hedonistic one.

The eudaimonic perspective suggests that a good life can be achieved not by engaging in short-term pleasure-inducing actions but by exploring one's true potential (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Individuals make choices that give meaning to their lives when they take action for their own lives, rather than seeking to avoid pain or pursue pleasure. In this context, it signifies individuals uncovering what lies within themselves, that is, discovering their potential and being able to use it (Ryff & Singer, 2008). For an individual to explore themselves and bring their potential to the forefront, they may encounter challenges in their life at times. According to this approach, the individual may face difficulties in achieving true happiness. However, for self-actualization, it is important for the individual to discover the strength to fight against difficulties instead of running away from pain. This discovery will also assist individuals in overcoming other challenges they may encounter in the future. In this manner, individuals can contemplate that there is a purpose and meaning to their lives (Ryan & Deci, 2001). Erik Erikson, in his Psychosocial Development Theory, discusses how individuals, as they approach the later stages of their lives, look back and evaluate whether they have lived a good life or not (Inanç, 2007). If individuals, upon reflection on their lives, perceive that they have confronted challenges rather than avoiding them and that they have achieved certain goals, then they can conclude that they have led a meaningful and good life. Otherwise, they may believe that their lives have been meaningless and lived in vain (Inanç, 2017). Considering this literature, it can be said that the well-being explanations based on the eudaimonic perspective, which have gained prevalence in the literature since the 2000s, offer more realistic foundations for explaining a good life in terms of mental health. It can be posited that consistently seeking temporary pleasures while avoiding pain may have negative implications for individuals' long-term states of well-being, as in Aesop's fable of the grasshopper and the ant.

A concept that describes people's well-being, based on the eudaimonic approach, is flourishing. According to Seligman (2010), a pioneer in positive psychology, the concept of flourishing is associated with various

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dimensions of well-being including psychological, subjective, and mental well-being. In other words, the concept of flourishing is an inclusive term representing individuals' overall well-being in life.

Flourishing means more than feeling good at that moment. This concept is about living well in the long term instead of a temporary state of feeling (Forgeard, et al., 2011). It can also be said that flourishing means more than the absence of psychological disorder because flourishing is a concept associated with positive mental health (Keyes, 2007). Flourishing entails the experience of key dimensions within the realm of social-psychological functioning, including but not limited to aspects such as self-acceptance, perceived competence, optimism, relatedness, cultivation of supportive and gratifying interpersonal relationships, active contribution to the well-being of others, and garnering respect from peers (Diener et al., 2010). Individuals with high levels of flourishing function positively in both social and personal areas of their lives and are successful in maintaining their mental health (Michalec et al., 2009).

Individuals with high levels of flourishing have high levels of positive affect, well-being, and life satisfaction and low levels of negative affect (Diehl et al., 2011). When the studies in the literature are examined, it is seen that flourishing is positively related to mindfulness (Catalino & Fredrickson, 2011), autonomy and competency (Diener et al., 2010), positive relations with others (Telef, 2013), and psychological well-being (Keyes, 2002).

It is known that people's flourishing is related to various factors, and one of these factors is believed to be belongingness. Studies on the concept of belonging have become widespread since the 1960s. Maslow (1968), who provided theoretical explanations about belonging, described belonging as the sensation of being recognised and accepted by other people. Anant (1967), a pioneer researcher on the concept of belonging, delineated belongingness as the degree of personal engagement within a social system, such that the individual perceives themselves as both essential and integral to the overall functioning of the system.

It can be asserted that human beings are motivated to establish a requisite degree of enduring and favorable interpersonal relationships. The concept of belongingness emerges as an intrinsic psychological need within the human experience, positing that individuals harbor an inherent, all-encompassing motivation to establish and perpetuate, at the very least, a fundamental quantity of enduring, affirmative, and meaningful interpersonal connections. Two criteria have been proposed to fulfill the need for belongingness (Baumeister & Leary 1995). First, a requirement for regular, emotionally satisfying interactions with a select group of individuals and second, the stipulation that these interactions occur within the framework of a temporally stable and lasting emotional investment in each other's well-being. In this context, it can be said that belonging has a structure based on a long-term relationship.

Belongingness is defined as individuals perceiving themselves as a valuable and important part of the social environment in which they live (Duru, 2015). Human beings are naturally social. In fact, in the hierarchy of needs proposed by Maslow (1968), belongingness is observed to constitute a fundamental need following physiological and safety needs. In other words, if an individual does not perceive oneself as belonging to the environment in which they are situated, there will be a deficiency in the realm of basic life necessities. Therefore, belongingness is a necessity in interpersonal relationships. In other words, it can be argued that if individuals do not perceive themselves as belonging to their social environment, there will be a deficiency in a fundamental aspect of their basic life needs.

When individuals feel a sense of belonging to their social environment, they may perceive themselves as individuals valued and loved by their surroundings. Thus, it can also be said that they believe that they will not be alone in difficult situations and feel secure. As a matter of fact, throughout history, people have preferred to live in communities rather than individually. Because belonging can contribute to an individual's positive affect. Conversely, when individuals do not feel a sense of belonging to their social environment, they may feel insecure and rootless (Demir, 2023; Duru, 2007). The level of belongingness is positively associated with variables such as psychological well-being, subjective well-being, and happiness, as demonstrated in previous studies (Moeller et al., 2020), and it has a negative relationship with variables such as loneliness, depression, and suicidal ideation (Ploskonka et al., 2015).

One of the concepts related to belongingness is forgiveness. Forgiveness is described as the gradual decrease in the aggrieved individual's desire to harm the wrongdoer over time and the increasing willingness to extend goodwill toward the wrongdoer (McCullough et al., 1997). In interpersonal relationships, forgiveness can be explained as the aggrieved individual choosing to act with emotions such as understanding, tolerance, and empathy instead of negative emotions such as anger, rage, or vengeance when they have been wronged

(McCullough, 2000). In other words, individuals with high levels of forgiveness exhibit a constructive rather than destructive attitude toward their relationships.

Psychologically, forgiveness is a multifaceted process that involves a range of emotions and cognitive transformations (McCullough & Worthington, 1994). The journey of forgiveness typically begins with acknowledging the harm or offense that has occurred (McCullough et al., 1998). This step involves confronting and accepting the pain or injustice inflicted. In addition, forgiveness often entails developing empathy and compassion toward the wrongdoer, attempting to understand their perspective, motives, or circumstances. One of the central elements of forgiveness is the conscious decision to release negative emotions such as anger and resentment. This emotional release can have profound positive effects on mental health. Forgiveness does not necessarily equal reconciliation. While forgiveness can lead to reconciliation in some cases, in others, it may involve a decision to distance oneself from the wrongdoer to protect one's well-being.

In forgiveness, the individual is aware that they have been wronged and does not deny the injustice they have experienced (Wade et al., 2005). Additionally, the aggrieved individual considers the possibility that the wrongdoer may commit further wrongdoings in the future (Fincham et al., 2005). In other words, forgiveness is not condoning. Accordingly, the aggrieved individuals, while being aware of what they have experienced and the potential for future wrongdoings, choose to reframe their relationship with the wrongdoer or group that has wronged them. When reframing their relationship, the aggrieved individual prefers to do so in a positive manner, avoiding actions that would harm themselves or others. In this way, individuals can continue to live their lives from where they left off, choosing forgiveness over dwelling in negative emotions and thoughts (Friedman & Toussaint, 2006). Individuals with high levels of forgiveness have higher psychological well-being (McCullough et al., 2007), whereas those with low levels of forgiveness tend to experience more illnesses and suffer from negative emotions such as depression and anger to a greater extent (Toussaint et al., 2001). Considering these findings, forgiveness makes life more livable and positively contributes to well-being. It can be said that forgiveness has important implications for interpersonal relationships and social dynamics. When individuals forgive, they can restore trust and repair damaged relationships. Furthermore, forgiveness is often seen as a pro-social act that contributes to the overall harmony of communities and societies (McCullough et al., 1997). Despite its potential benefits, forgiveness is considered a challenging and complex process (Ahmed et al., 2007). Some individuals may struggle to forgive because of the severity of the offense, ongoing harm, or the absence of remorse from the wrongdoer. Additionally, there may be cultural, social, or personal barriers to forgiveness that individuals should overcome.

### **The Present Study**

Elevated prevalence rates of mental health issues have been extensively documented within the university student demographics (Moeller et al., 2020). To enhance the well-being of university students, it is imperative to discern and cultivate predictors of flourishing. In this study, a model was designed to understand the factors that predict university students' flourishing. When the literature is searched, no research has examined the mediating role of forgiveness between university students' belongingness and their flourishing. In this context, the mediating role of forgiveness in the relationship between the belonging and well-being of university students was examined.

From the perspective of Erik Erikson's Psychosocial Development Theory, university students are facing the developmental crisis of intimacy versus isolation (Inanç, 2017). Erikson's theory emphasizes that during this period, the key to psychosocial health for individuals is establishing positive relationships with the people around them. To establish positive relationships in their social setting, individuals must first have a social circle or environment. In other words, an individual should feel a sense of belonging to the environment in which they are situated. In this regard, a sense of belonging holds significant importance for the psychological health of university students.

University is indeed a unique experience from a social perspective. Many students are moving away from their families for the first time, moving to a new place, and forming relationships with new people. Belongingness is considered an important emotional state for university students. This is because individuals in this developmental period need to establish positive social connections with the people in their environment. Establishing positive social relationships can help them feel that they belong to their environment. Individuals with a strong sense of belonging are more likely to be forgiving to both themselves and others. Thus, individuals who feel a sense of belonging to their environment are thought to be more forgiving in challenging situations and this is believed to enhance their flourishing. In this context, this study

examines the mediating role of forgiveness in the relationship between university students' sense of belonging and their flourishing.

## **METHOD**

In this section, the design of the study, the participants, the data collection tools, and the techniques used in data analysis are described.

### **Research Design**

In this study, Hayes' (2018) Model 4 within the SPSS macro PROCESS v4 was used to examine the mediating role of forgiveness between belongingness and flourishing. Through macros extensively worked on and continuously improved by Hayes, this study provides findings encompassing multiple parameters in a single analysis based on a regression-based bootstrapping technique. In this study, a bootstrap coefficient was derived from 5,000 bootstrap samples, and 95% confidence intervals were established. In these analyses, for the results to be considered significant, the confidence intervals must not encompass zero for the lower and upper bounds (Preacher & Hayes, 2008). When the lower and upper limits do not include zero, it is concluded that the examined direct and indirect effects are statistically significant. Before the mediation model, preliminary analyses included examining the means, standard deviations, skewness, and kurtosis coefficients of the variables. In addition, the relationships between variables were assessed using Pearson correlation coefficients.

### **Participants**

This research was conducted with the participation of 381 voluntary university students studying at different universities in Türkiye ( $Age_{range} = 18-32$ ,  $Age_{mean} = 21.12$ ,  $Age_{sd} = 2.23$ ). Of the participants, 211 (55.4%) were female and 170 (44.6%) were male. When the distribution of university students in terms of class level was examined, 98 (25.7%) were freshmen, 96 (25.2%) were sophomores, 93 (24.4%) were juniors, and 94 (24.7%) were seniors.

### **Data Collection Tool**

In this section, the data collection tool used in this research is introduced. For data collection, the Flourishing Scale (Telef, 2013), the General Belongingness Scale (Satici & Gocet-Tekin, 2016), and the Heartland Forgiveness Scale (Bugay et al., 2012) were used. In addition, a personal information form and voluntary participation form prepared by the researcher were used.

#### ***The Flourishing Scale***

The Flourishing Scale was developed by Diener et al. (2010) to measure flourishing, and the scale was adapted to Turkish culture by Telef (2013) with university students. It is a unidimensional self-report scale consisting of 8 items (e.g., "I am optimistic about my future", "I am engaged and interested in my daily activities"). It is a 7-point Likert rating scale ("1 = Strongly Disagree" to "7 = Strongly Agree"), and the possible total scores range from 7 to 56 points. Higher score signifies that respondents perceive themselves positively in the critical domains of functioning. In the adaptation study, the total explained variance was 42%. Factor loadings ranged from .54 to .76, while confirmatory factor analyses were acceptable ( $\chi^2=92.90$ ,  $df = 20$ ,  $RMSEA= 0.08$ ,  $SRMR= 0.04$ ,  $GFI= 0.96$ ,  $NFI= 0.94$ ,  $RFI= 0.92$ ,  $CFI= 0.95$ ,  $IFI= 0.95$ ). Additionally, the internal consistency coefficients were found to be at acceptable level  $\alpha=.80$ , and the test-retest reliability coefficient was reported as .86.

#### ***General Belongingness Scale***

The General Belongingness Scale was developed by Malone et al. (2012) and adapted into Turkish by Satici and Gocet-Tekin (2016). The Turkish version of the scale consists of 12 items (e.g., "I have a sense of belonging", "I feel accepted by others") as in the original scale, with responses rated on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from "1=Strongly disagree" to "7=strongly agree." The scale has two dimensions, acceptance and rejection, and consists of 12 items. The total score is obtained from the scale. The possible scores that can be obtained from the scale for each dimension range from 6 to 42, with higher scores indicating an increase in the level of the relevant dimension. During the Turkish adaptation process, the two-dimensional structure of the scale was confirmed with university students, as indicated by various fit indices by Tabachnick & Fidel (2019) ( $\chi^2/df = 2.26$ ,  $CFI = .93$ ,  $GFI = .94$ ,  $AGFI = .92$ ,  $SRMR = .05$ ,  $RMSEA = .06$ ). Additionally, the internal consistency coefficients were found to be at acceptable levels, ranging from  $\alpha=0.82$  to 0.76.

#### ***Heartland Forgiveness Scale***

The scale developed by Thompson et al. (2005) to measure individuals' forgiveness tendencies was adapted into Turkish by Bugay et al. (2012). The scale consists of 18 items (e.g., "With time I am understanding of others

for the mistakes they've made", "Although others have hurt me in the past, I have eventually been able to see them as good people") and three dimensions, using a 7-point Likert-type rating. The sub-dimensions are named as self-forgiveness, forgiveness of others, and forgiveness of situations. Possible scores from the scale range from 6 to 42 for each sub-dimension, and increasing scores indicate higher levels of the respective sub-dimensions. The total score is obtained from the scale. The Turkish version of the scale, similar to the original study, has been confirmed to have three dimensions:  $\chi^2 = 349.8$ ,  $p < .0001$ ;  $\chi^2/df = 2.65$ ;  $GFI = .96$ ,  $CFI = .97$ ,  $RMSEA = .04$ , and  $SRMR = .03$ . Because of the studies conducted to assess the validity and reliability of the scale, the Cronbach's alpha coefficients were calculated as follows: .75 for self-forgiveness sub-dimension, .78 for forgiveness of others, .79 for forgiveness of situations, and .86 for the total score. Test-retest coefficients were reported as .83, .72, .73 and .77 for the total score, respectively.

**Personal Information Form**

This form, prepared by the researcher, includes questions related to participants' genders, ages, and academic years.

**Voluntary Participation Form**

In this form, participants have been informed about the purpose of the study. In addition, it is emphasized that participation in the research is based on voluntary consent, and participants have the right to withdraw their participation at any time. Furthermore, the researcher's contact information has been provided.

**Data Collection**

In the context of the research, research and publication ethics were adhered to in all procedures. The researcher applied to Eskişehir Osmangazi University Social and Human Sciences Human Research Ethics Committee for this research. Ethical permission was obtained from Eskişehir Osmangazi University Social and Human Sciences Human Research Ethics Committee (Approval number: E-64075176-050.01.04-2300186703). In the context of data collection, voluntary participation form, personal information form, and scales intended for use were initially prepared using Google Forms and made available to participants. In the scope of the research, participants were accessed online. In this context, voluntary participation forms, personal information forms and scales were initially prepared for participants using Google Forms and made ready for their use. During the data collection phase, participants were first asked to complete the voluntary participation form. Participants who completed the voluntary participation form proceeded to complete the personal information form and the scales for use in the research on the next page of Google Forms. A total of 405 participants' data were collected in the study. Data from participants who withdrew (7 participants) and those who left more than three questions of the scales incomplete (17 participants) were excluded, and the analyses were conducted with 381 participants.

**FINDINGS**

In this section, the findings of the study are presented. Descriptive statistics and correlation coefficients for the variables included in the study are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1. Results of the Preliminary Analysis for the Variables**

Variable	Belongingness	Forgiveness	Flourishing
Belongingness	–		
Forgiveness	.302**	–	
Flourishing	.539**	.272**	–
Mean	63.98	32.20	42.76
SD	10.11	6.05	7.46
Skewness	-.533	-.123	-.708
Kurtosis	.004	.635	.743

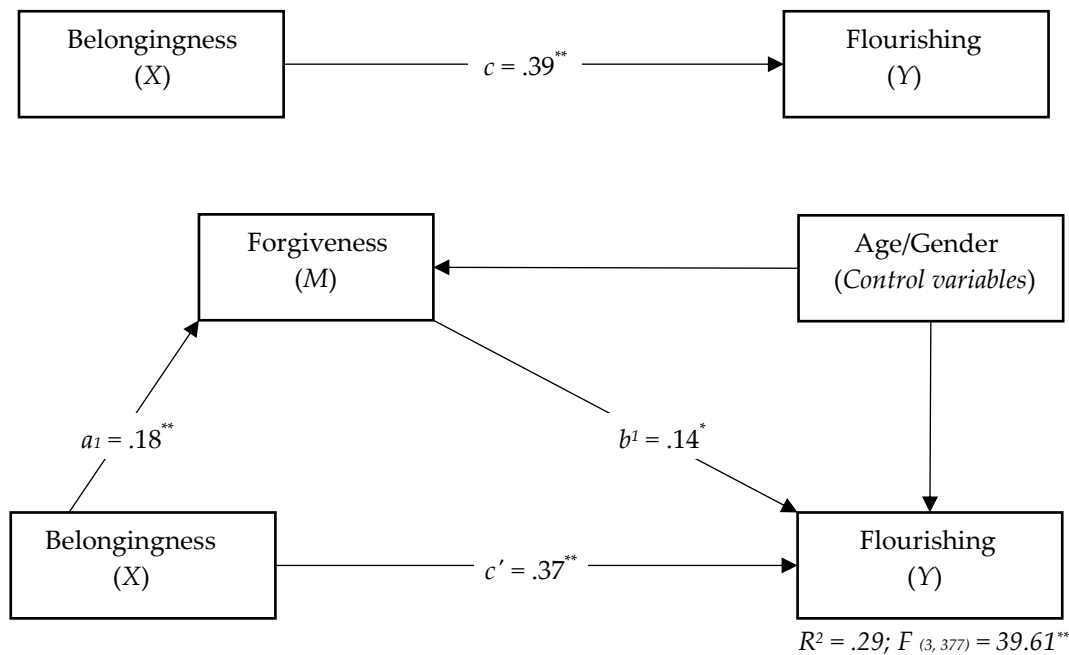
\*\*  $p < .001$

As evident from Table 1, belongingness exhibits a significant positive relationship with forgiveness ( $r = .302$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Similarly, positive significant correlations were identified between belongingness and flourishing ( $r = .539$ ,  $p < .001$ ) as well as between forgiveness and flourishing ( $r = .272$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

**Bootstrapping Analysis**

Belongingness and flourishing were analyzed for the mediating role of forgiveness using the bootstrapping-based PROCESS macro. Age and gender were included as control variables in the analysis. The results of this

analysis provide insights into the direct and indirect effects of belongingness (X) on flourishing (Y), as depicted in Figure 1.



**Figure 1. Mediating Role of Forgiveness**

\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*  $p < .001$

As evident from Figure 1, belongingness directly and positively predicts flourishing without any mediators ( $c = .39, p < .001$ ). When examining the mediation model, it can be observed that when belongingness includes mediators, the coefficient predicting flourishing ( $c' = .37, p < .001$ ) decreases but remains statistically significant. Thus, partial mediation is at play in the model. Additionally, belongingness directly and positively predicts forgiveness ( $a_1 = .18, p < .001$ ). Furthermore, forgiveness ( $b_1 = .14, p < .01$ ) was found to positively predict flourishing. Moreover, it was determined that the mediation model established for predicting flourishing is significant [ $F_{(3, 377)} = 39.61, p < .001$ ] and that the two variables account for 29% of the total variance in flourishing. In addition to all of the above, it has been determined that the indirect effect of belongingness on flourishing through forgiveness is also significant (bootstrap = .034, 95% CI = .004, .068).

**DISCUSSION and CONCLUSION**

This study presents a model recommendation for the identification of determinants contributing to flourishing. In this context, the mediating role of forgiveness in the relationship between belongingness and flourishing among university students was examined. Forgiveness was found to play a partial mediating role between belongingness and flourishing in university students. The results showed that belongingness was determined to have a path directly increasing flourishing. Another path is between belongingness and forgiveness, which means that with an increase in belongingness, the tendency to forgive rises. Also, it was found that with the rising of forgiveness by belongingness, flourishing is elevated. The study identified an indirect effect, forgiveness, which partly mediates the relationship between belongingness and flourishing. In this context, the pathways in the model are explained in light of the relevant literature.

First, the positive prediction of university students' belongingness on flourishing is discussed. Belongingness is related to the individuals' perception that they are valued by their social environment, that there are people they can turn to when they need them, and that they are satisfied in their social relationships. The positive prediction of belongingness on flourishing is rooted in the idea that feeling connected and accepted by other fosters mental health (Seligman, 2010). Belonging is considered a crucial component of social functionality.

University students are individuals in the young adulthood period in terms of their psychosocial development. It is deemed significant for university students to experience a sense of belonging in coping with the developmental crisis of young adulthood. Belonging to supportive social networks, whether friendships, peer groups, or university communities, provides a safety net for young adults as they explore their identities and aspirations. Belongingness is a fundamental human need that becomes particularly crucial during the

transitional phase of young adulthood (Maslow, 1968). University students find themselves in a unique life stage, marked by psychosocial changes and developmental challenges. As they navigate the complexities of higher education, they simultaneously undergo the critical transition from adolescence to adulthood.

When examining the studies (Ploskonka et al., 2015; Stebleton et al., 2014) related to the sense of belonging among university students, it can be observed that there are significant negative relationships between the level of belongingness and the levels of social anxiety, loneliness, and depression. In addition, individuals with a high level of belongingness tend to have higher levels of happiness, subjective well-being, and psychological well-being (Moeller et al., 2020). In this context, it can be said that the finding that belongingness positively predicts flourishing is consistent with existing studies in the literature.

Another finding obtained in the study is that belongingness positively predicts forgiveness. According to Baumeister and Leary (1995), individuals are motivated to establish a certain number of positive interpersonal relationships. Forgiveness is a state in which individuals consciously adopt a positive approach toward those who have wronged them. When individuals feel a sense of belonging within their social networks, they are more likely to experience empathy and compassion toward others (Worthington, 1998). This heightened empathy can facilitate forgiveness by fostering an understanding of the perspectives and motivations of wrongdoers. Forgiveness often involves a willingness to let go of negative emotions and reach out to others, either to seek reconciliation or to rebuild damaged relationships (Hill & Allemand, 2010). A sense of belonging can provide the necessary social context for these actions.

Belongingness is associated with higher levels of trust and positive interactions within social groups (Enright et al., 1992). Trust is a critical component of forgiveness, as individuals need to believe that reconciliation or improved relationships are possible (McCullough et al., 1997). Positive interactions within a community can reinforce this trust and facilitate forgiveness. It can be considered that belongingness within a particular social group often aligns individuals with the norms and values of that group. These norms may include forgiveness as a valued and expected behavior. In such contexts, individuals are more likely to adopt forgiveness as a social practice. Belongingness may provide individuals with the opportunity to improve their conflict resolution skills (Lee & Robbins, 1995). Individuals with high levels of belongingness can learn effective communication and conflict resolution strategies that help forgiveness.

In light of the relevant literature, it can be said that individuals with a high level of belongingness are more likely to exhibit higher levels of forgiveness. It can be thought that people who experience belonging might be particularly inclined to forgive wrongdoings to preserve social bonds. Forgiving attitudes are elicited in individuals due to their sense of belonging (Exline et al., 2004), as individuals characterized by a heightened sense of belonging perceive themselves as being in closer proximity to their social milieu (Harber & Wenberg, 2005). McCullough (2000) posited that the subjective experience of closeness assumes significance as an important determinant in the context of forgiveness. In conclusion, the finding of forgiveness being positively predicted by belongingness aligns with the relevant literature.

Another finding in the research model is that forgiveness positively predicts flourishing. Forgiveness is defined as the process of repairing relationships and healing internal emotional wounds by letting go of resentment and revenge against the wrongdoer (Hargrave & Sells, 1997). According to this definition, forgiveness is an internal and positive change toward the offender. It is considered important for psychological health that the individual forgives the person or persons who have wronged him /her and shapes his /her social relations positively. However, when forgivers forgive the offender, they also show a positive change in their thoughts, feelings, and behaviour towards themselves (McCullough et al., 2000). Forgiveness can lead to a shift in mindset from one focused on negativity and retribution to one centered on empathy, compassion, and positivity.

The act of forgiveness allows individuals to let go of these negative emotions, opening mental and emotional space for more positive and flourishing experiences. For example, holding grudges and harboring resentment can be harmful to one's mental and emotional health (McCullough et al., 2001). It can be asserted that forgiveness, apart from improving social relationships, is important for positive mental health. Because forgiveness distracts people from negative emotions and creates an opportunity for them to experience positive emotions instead. It has been asserted that individuals characterized by a high level of flourishing tend to encounter positive emotions with greater frequency while experiencing fewer instances of negative emotions (Seligman, 2010).

Forgiver individuals undergo a process of pain alleviation and may perceive their lives as being more conducive to livability, potentially leading to an increase in flourishing. When individuals forgive, they release negative emotions such as anger, resentment, and hostility (Hong et al., 2009.) Researchers have posited that the absence of forgiveness intensifies negative emotions, resulting in heightened levels of anxiety, depression, and emotional instability, which, in severe instances, may culminate in the onset of mental illness (Griffin et al., 2015; Webb & Toussaint, 2020). On the other hand, individuals with higher levels of forgiveness have higher psychological well-being and life satisfaction (Toussaint & Friedman, 2009). In this context, it can be said that the finding that forgiveness is a positive predictor of flourishing agrees with the literature.

The last discussion about the model examined within the scope of this research is related to the partial mediating role of forgiveness between belongingness and flourishing. When the findings of this study are analyzed, it is noteworthy that there is a positive relationship between all variables.

The findings indicate that individuals who feel a sense of belonging in their social environment are more likely to be forgiving of negative situations they encounter. Therefore, as an individual's sense of belonging to their environment increases, their tendencies toward forgiveness despite injustices are likely to increase. With an increase in individuals' forgiveness, they may have more positive relationships with both their environment and themselves. Additionally, as forgiveness increases, individuals are more likely to experience emotions such as peace, serenity, and happiness instead of anger, stress or anxiety. This situation elevates individuals' levels of flourishing.

Regarding university students in particular, it is known that they are in a critical life period in terms of psychosocial development. In this developmental stage, it is important for individuals to establish positive relationships with their social environment to cope with the developmental crisis of intimacy versus isolation (Inanç, 2017). In this context, belongingness and forgiveness, which are the concepts that are thought to predict the well-being of university students, were examined in the study, and a model to explain the relationships between these concepts was tested. According to the results of the study, forgiveness is a partial mediator between the well-being and belonging of university students.

The social environment of university students generally consists of people who are university students like themselves, and they spend a part of their days together. For instance, they may find themselves sharing the same classroom, being in the same social environment, or even residing in the same accommodations. Within this context, it is anticipated that university students, who typically share common spaces and experiences, would cultivate a sense of belonging toward one another. In addition, university students, who are usually together, may occasionally experience disagreements or conflicts related to their academic or social relationships. Because of these disagreements or conflicts, university students may experience negative emotions such as anger toward each other or even terminate their relationships. Nevertheless, for university students who coexist within the same social settings encompassing classrooms, dining facilities, campus grounds, student organizations, dormitories, or houses, it can be posited that being in the presence of individuals with whom they have severed ties or harbor adverse sentiments constitutes a disconcerting circumstance. As an example, this situation might manifest when individuals find themselves in the same classroom as someone with whom they hold animosity, or when they are obliged to share common spaces because of their membership in the same student community. It can be assumed that this situation will negatively predict the flourishing of the individual. Because individuals continue to experience negative affect as long as they share the same social environment. Prolonged experience of negative affect is a risk factor for mental health (Seligman, 2010).

It is plausible that university students, who typically interact closely and inhabit common social environments, may extend forgiveness to one another when confronted with disagreements or difficulties, particularly when a strong sense of belonging exists among them. Because these individuals often share the same social environments, it can be thought that they would prefer to feel comfortable in their social environments rather than the internal unrest that comes with being constantly in negative emotions. Although university students who have strong belongingness with each other may experience disagreements or problems, the act of forgiving those individuals with whom they experience disagreements or problems and those with whom they typically associate can have a positive impact on their flourishing. In conclusion, the finding that belongingness predict flourishing through forgiveness is consistent with the literature and is a plausible result.

#### **Limitations and suggestions**



This study, which examines the mediating role of forgiveness between belonging and flourishing, has some limitations. Data for the study were collected using self-report measurement tools. Therefore, to further enhance scientific knowledge on the subject, new research can be conducted using various methods such as interviews, observation, or peer assessments. Since the research was conducted with the participation of university students, the generalizability of the results is limited to university students. Therefore, there is a need for new studies involving individuals in different developmental stages to expand the understanding of this research model. The research was conducted using a cross-sectional methodology. Therefore, there is a need for experimental or longitudinal studies to put forward the real sense between variables.

Alongside these limitations, some suggestions can be made for future studies. In this study, which concurrently examined belongingness, forgiveness, and flourishing in a university student population for the first time, connections between these variables were revealed. The findings from this study can be used in the development of psychoeducational programs aimed at addressing the flourishing of university students. Furthermore, it can be investigated whether there are different mediator variables in the relationship between belongingness and flourishing.

## Declarations

### Conflict of Interest

No potential conflicts of interest were disclosed by the author with respect to the research, authorship, or publication of this article.

### Ethics Approval

Formal ethics approval was granted by the Social and Human Sciences Human Research Ethics Committee of Eskişehir Osmangazi University. I conducted this study in accordance with the Helsinki Declaration of 1975.

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### Research and Publication Ethics Statement

This study was approved by the Social and Human Sciences Human Research Ethics Committee of Eskişehir Osmangazi University (Approval Number: E-64075176-050.01.04-2300186703). Hereby, I as the author consciously assure that for the manuscript the following is fulfilled:

- This material is the author's own original work, which has not been previously published elsewhere.
- This paper reflects the authors' own research and analysis in a truthful and complete manner.
- The results are appropriately placed in the context of prior and existing research.
- All sources used are properly disclosed.

### Contribution Rates of Authors to the Article

First author contributed 100%.

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