Unveiling the Potential: Analyzing Trends of Character Strengths among Pakistani Adolescents

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Abstract. Adolescence has long been viewed as a stage of storm and stress. This conceptualization has led to focus primarily on the problems associated with this life-stage. In line with the recent shift towards prevention science and positive psychology, there emerges a need to study adolescence from a strength-based perspective. It can help in gaining a holistic understanding of this population by focusing on their existing resources that can be utilized further for promoting their wellbeing. In this regard, the Classification of Strengths and Virtues has been an extensively researched model that focuses on one's strengths by finding the answer to 'what's best in people' and its impact on their wellbeing. This study has aimed to assess the trends of these character strengths among Pakistani adolescents aged 13 to 17 years. Values in Action Inventory of Character Strengths-Youth Survey Revised (VIA-YR2) was conducted on 500 participants, recruited from schools of Rawalpindi/Islamabad using cluster random sampling. Findings revealed that constructs of Appreciation of Beauty and Excellence, Love, Hope, Creativity, and Love of Learning appeared as the highest whereas Humility, Self-regulation, Fairness, Zest, and Honesty were the lowest prevalent strengths among the participants. Both genders presented a similar pattern of strengths apart from females displaying gratitude instead of love of learning as one of their highest strengths. Group comparison showed that females scored significantly higher on most character strengths as compared to males except for the self-regulation. These findings can be utilized in designing and implementing interventions that can foster the well-being of adolescents.

Keywords: Character Strengths, Positive Psychology, Well-being, Adolescence,

Introduction.

Adolescent mental health is a critical area of investigation from preventive perspective as almost half of all psychopathologies first emerge at age 14; though diagnosed later in life (Solmi, Radua, Olivola, 2021). Adolescence has long been viewed as a stage of storm and stress as coined by Hall in 1904 (Stirrups, 2018) which led to the body of research primarily focusing on the problems associated with this life-stage. With the recent shift in the conceptualization of mental health going beyond absence of illness but rather incorporating the state of optimal functioning (WHO, 2004), there emerges a need to study adolescence from a strength-based perspective. A strength-based perspective to adolescent mental health can thus create a holistic understanding of this population by highlighting their existing resources which scan be utilized further for promoting their wellbeing (Buchanan, Romer, Wray-Lake, & Butler-Barnes, 2023; Charabin, Climie, Miller, Jelinkova, & Wilkins 2023). The associated multitude of changes in adolescence that have primarily be considered as a problem can also be viewed as an opportunity for change due to higher chances of plasticity (Buchanan, et al., 2023). This viewpoint can help in focusing on the existing strengths of this population which can improve their overall mental health.

In line with this strength-based approach, one of the most extensively researched models is 'VIA Classification of Strengths and Virtues' that focuses on finding the answer to 'what's best in people' and its

impact on their wellbeing. (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). According to Neimic (2018) this taxonomy of strengths is the result of a three-year process involving 55 scientists and review of more than 200 works which resulted in 24-Character Strengths (CS), nested under six categories of virtues (see Table 1.).

Table 1. VIA Classification of Virtues and Character Strengths

Virtues	Character Strengths
Wisdom	Cognitive Strengths - Creativity, Curiosity, Perspective taking, Judgement and Love of learning
Courage	Emotional Strengths - Bravery, Perseverance, Honesty and Zest
Humanity	Interpersonal Strengths- Love, Kindness and Social Intelligence
Justice	Civic Strengths - Fairness, Leadership and Teamwork
Temperence	Strengths of self against excess- Humility, Self-regulation, Forgiveness and Prudence
Transcendence	Forge connection & meaning - Appreciation of Beauty & Excellence, Humor, Hope, Gratitude, Spirituality,

Evidence suggests that character strengths have inherent universality due to their cultural applicability and relevance (Park, Peterson & Seligman, 2006), but the manifestation of these strengths have contextual dependence (Brown, Blanchard, McGrath, 2020; Snow, 2019). Many cross-culture studies have presented mixed findings about the contextual differences in the presentation of character strengths. Two large scale studies assessed character strengths among 54 nations and 50 US states (Park, et al., 2006) followed by an updated study on 75 nations including Pakistan (McGrath, 2014) which showed substantial cross-culture similarities in trends of character strengths. Meanwhile other studies have indicated cultural differences in these trends as US sample reported higher levels of kindness, fairness, honesty, judgment and gratitude (Park et al., 2006); integrity, kindness, love, spirituality, forgiveness and fairness among UK sample and curiosity, judgment, self-regulation, and love of learning among Irani sample (Shahidi et al., 2023).

In Pakistani context, there exists limited research available on character strengths mainly been conducted on adult population at workplace and university setting (Mubashar & Harzer, 2018; Ramzan & Amjad, 2017; Zubair, Kamal & Artemeva, 2018; Anjum, Amjad and Mubashar, 2020). Though, these studies indicate that

applicability and relevance of character strengths among Pakistani population more research is still needed to gain a comprehensive understanding about the phenomenon specifically in adolescent population. This study will henceforth add onto the existing body of literature in two ways; one by assessing the strengths of Pakistani adolescents shifting a focus from problems to the inherent assets of this population and secondly it has highlighted unique manifestation of these character strengths in a diverse socio-cultural context.

The main objectives of this study were to assess the trends of character strengths among Pakistani adolescents aged 13 to 17 years. Additionally, it has also aimed to assess the role of gender in the manifestation of these patterns.

Methodology.

Participants. This study had cross-sectional survey research design. The participants of the study included 500 school-going adolescents (aged 13-17years) enrolled in a semi-government school system of Pakistan. They were recruited using multi-stage cluster random sampling from schools of Rawalpindi/Islamabad. (See Fig-1 for detailed flowchart of participant recruitment process). 57% of the study participants were boys while 43% were girls, with most participants falling under 13-14 years (47%) followed by 15-16years (32%) and 17years (22%) age-range.

Measuring Instruments. Data for this study was collected through group-administration of the self-report measures. A demographic sheet was administered to collect demographic details of the participants including their age, gender and class. The pattern of character strengths was assessed using VIA-Youth Survey Revised (VIA-YR2). This 98-item self-report measure has specifically been revised for ages 13-17years by (Jermann & McGrath, 2022). It uses a 5-point scale to measure the degree to which respondents endorse statements about their strengths (i.e., 1 = not at all like me to 5 = very much like me)
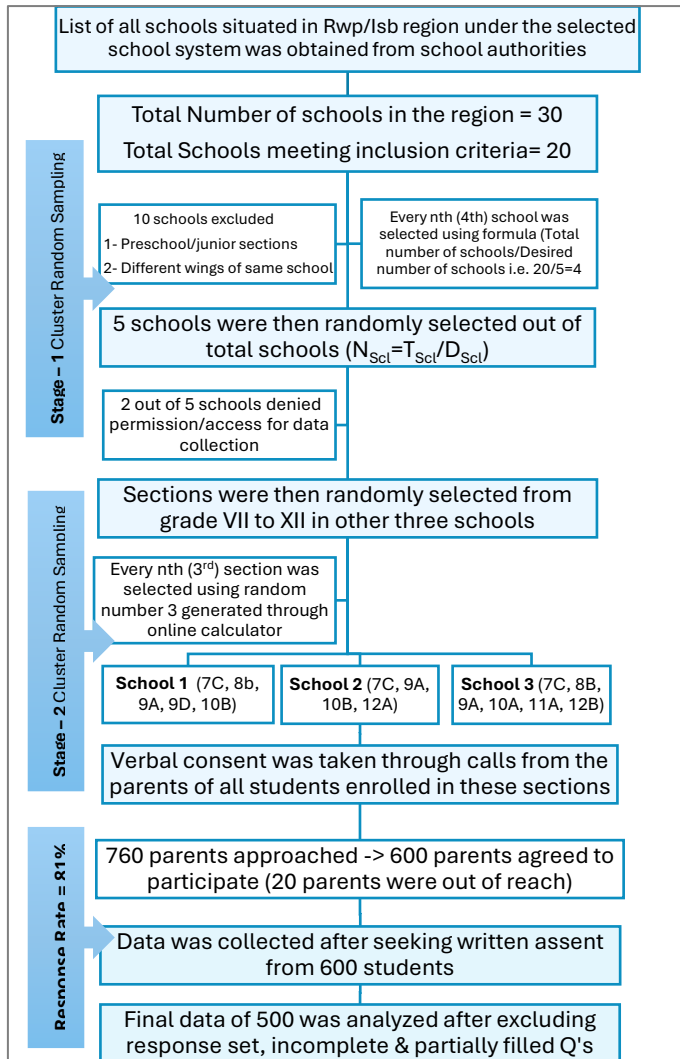
Figure 1. Participant Recruitment Process

Procedure. Ethical approval was taken before commencing this study from the ethical review board of the affiliated institute of the researcher. Data was then collected through group administration of the study instruments after seeking permission from the school authorities, verbal consent of the parents, and written assent from the participants. Limits of confidentiality were explained to the participants, and they were assured that they can withdraw at any stage of research without any repercussion. Multiple visits were done by the researcher at each school for data collection and participants were provided with a referral for telephonic and/or in-person counseling in case of any emotional distress experienced by them at the end of each session.

Analysis Plan. Data was examined using descriptive analysis, mean comparison of strengths, group-comparison through independent sample t-test to assess any gender differences among the pattern of 24-character strengths among the participants using SPSS 23.0 version.

Results.

Descriptive Statistics. Table 2 shows the mean, standard deviation and alpha coefficients of 24-character strengths as assessed by VIA-YR2. These strengths have been arranged in descending order based on their mean revealing the highest and lowest strengths among the study sample. Table 2 also shows that the data has been normally distributed as the values of skewness and kurtosis fall within acceptable ranges (i.e. between ±2). Moreover, the α-coefficient of all subscales indicates good internal consistency among them as the values range from .70 to .91.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics of Character Strengths (N=500)

	M	SD	Skew	Kurt	α
Beauty & Excellence	3.93	.78	-.86	.66	.88
Love	3.78	.83	-.64	.03	.86
Hope	3.70	.84	-.66	.02	.89
Creativity	3.66	.79	-.54	.04	.87
Love of learning	3.64	.79	-.45	.19	.80
Bravery	3.61	.69	-.27	-.16	.81
Gratitude	3.59	.80	-.49	.24	.86
Kindness	3.55	.70	-.32	.13	.74
Humor	3.55	.91	-.35	-.35	.85
Spirituality	3.55	.74	-.26	.25	.84
Judgement	3.51	.79	-.32	-.35	.85
Forgiveness	3.51	.90	-.53	.04	.90
Teamwork	3.48	.63	-.39	.14	.90
Curiosity	3.47	.83	-.20	-.25	.90
Perspective	3.43	.77	-.51	.26	.82
Prudence	3.37	.72	-.35	.13	.70
Leadership	3.32	.88	-.31	-.24	.75
Perseverance	3.24	.72	-.04	.15	.88
Social Intelligence	3.22	.72	-.21	.12	.73
Honesty	3.13	.76	.11	.27	.88
Zest	3.04	.79	-.02	.17	.88
Fairness	3.04	.87	.14	-.33	.91
Self-Regulation	2.91	.77	.03	.11	.80
Humility	2.86	.80	.22	-.09	.88

M = Mean, SD= Standard Deviation, Skew = Skewness, Kurt = Kurtosis

Pattern of Character Strengths. Findings revealed in table 2 shows that constructs of Appreciation of Beauty and Excellence (M=3.93, SD=.78), Love (M=3.78, SD=.83), Hope (M=3.70, SD=.84), Creativity (M=3.66, SD=.79), and Love of Learning (M=3.64, SD=.79) appeared as the highest whereas Humility (M=2.86, SD=.8), Self-regulation (M=2.91, SD=.77), Fairness (M=3.04, SD=.87), Zest (M=3.04, SD=.79), and Honesty (M=3.13, SD=.76) were the lowest prevalent strengths among the participants.

Both genders presented a similar pattern of highest versus lowest strengths apart from girls displaying gratitude (M=3.7, SD=.81) instead of love of learning (M=3.6, SD=.8) as one of their highest strengths (see Fig. 2). Comparatively girls scored higher on most of the character strengths as compared to boys except for the self-regulation, hope, honesty, zest and prudence.
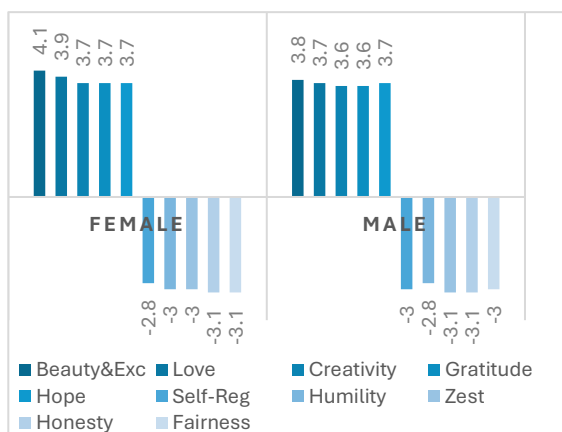

Fig 2. Gender based Pattern of Highest vs Lowest Character Strengths

Gender Differences in Character Strengths. The independent sample t-test was conducted to compare mean differences based on gender among the 24-Character Strengths. As shown in table 3. significant differences were found on 8 out of 24-strengths. Girls scored significantly higher on the appreciation of beauty and excellence (M=4.06, SD=.69; t(498)=3.06, p=.00), creativity (M=3.74, SD=.79; t(498)=2.03, p=.04), gratitude (M=3.69, SD=.80; t(498)=2.39, p=.02), humility (M=2.96, SD=.82; t(498)=2.24, p=.03), humor (M=3.66, SD=.94; t(498)=2.52, p=.01), kindness (M=3.65, SD=.67; t(498)=2.83, p=.01), and teamwork

(M=3.56, SD=.63; t(498)=2.24, p=.03) than boys. However, boys (M=2.98, SD=.77) scored significantly higher than their female counterparts (M=2.81, SD=.78); on self-regulation t (498) = -2.41, p=.02 (as shown in Table 3.).

Table 3. Independent-Sample t-test to assess gender differences among character strengths

	Female (n₁=215)		Male (n₂=285)		t (498)	p
	M	SD	M	SD		
Beauty & Excellence	4.06	.69	3.84	.83	3.06	.00
Bravery	3.66	.73	3.57	.67	1.50	.13
Creativity	3.74	.79	3.59	.77	2.03	.04
Curiosity	3.52	.88	3.41	.79	1.55	.12
Fairness	3.10	.88	2.97	.85	1.63	.11
Forgiveness	3.49	.95	3.53	.84	-.42	.67
Gratitude	3.69	.80	3.52	.78	2.39	.02
Honesty	3.10	.78	3.15	.74	-.66	.51
Hope	3.67	.82	3.72	.84	-.58	.56
Humility	2.96	.82	2.80	.77	2.24	.03
Humor	3.66	.94	3.45	.88	2.52	.01
Judgement	3.55	.80	3.47	.78	1.02	.31
Kindness	3.65	.67	3.47	.70	2.83	.01
Leadership	3.33	.91	3.32	.84	.08	.94
Love of learning	3.66	.80	3.63	.77	.52	.60
Love	3.86	.82	3.74	.83	1.62	.11
Perseverance	3.27	.78	3.22	.67	.65	.52
Perspective	3.47	.76	3.41	.77	.77	.45
Prudence	3.32	.82	3.40	.63	-1.20	.23
Self-Regulation	2.81	.78	2.98	.77	-2.41	.02
Social Intelligence	3.23	.77	3.22	.70	.09	.93
Spirituality	3.56	.77	3.54	.72	.35	.73
Teamwork	3.56	.63	3.43	.62	2.24	.03
Zest	3.02	.84	3.06	.76	-.58	.57

Discussion

This study has attempted to assess the pattern of character strengths among Pakistani adolescents. Findings revealed a unique profile of character strengths in the sample with appreciation of beauty and excellence, hope (Strengths related to meaning making and connection), creativity, love of learning (Cognitive Strengths), and love (Interpersonal Strength) appearing as the most prominent while humility, self-regulation (Strengths of Self-protecting against excess), fairness (Civic Strength), zest, and honesty (Emotional Strengths) tend to be ranked lowest. A similar trend was

observed among both genders except for gratitude being the highest strength instead of love of learning among girls. These findings highlight interesting aspects about adolescents in Pakistani context.

One possible explanation of this pattern can be proposed as the function of inherent changes and associated sociocultural dynamics faced by adolescents at this developmental stage. Adolescents tend to present with an openness to learning and new experiences and a higher need for connection/belongingness that can explain the prevalence of higher cognitive and interpersonal strengths. Additionally, hope refers to the forward-mindedness and optimism which is highly valued and fostered in Pakistani contexts (Hassan, Sadaf, Saeed, & Idrees, 2018) as reflected by these findings despite all the challenges faced by this population.

The lowest rated strengths such as self-regulation, zest and fairness may reflect the impact of challenges and social pressures experienced by adolescents in Pakistani society (Sulaiman, Ali, & Khatoon, 2019). In general, adolescence is a crucial developmental stage with multitude of biological and psychological changes further exacerbating the emotional toll among this population and lowering their abilities of self-regulation and energy/zest for life. The presence of external pressures such as academic stress, competitiveness, hierarchal social structures, societal norms and pressure for social conformity (Tharani et al., 2024) alongside the exposure to multiple and diverse value systems through media makes it even challenging for them to maintain their honesty, fairness and humility.

The gender differences highlighted in this study further shed light on how being a girl or boy affects the pattern of character strengths among Pakistani adolescents. Female adolescents scored significantly higher on most of the strengths including appreciation of beauty and strength, gratitude, humility, creativity, humor, kindness, and teamwork except for the self-regulation where males showed higher scores. These findings corroborated with existing literature (Brown, et al., 2020; Heintz, Kramm, & Ruch, 2019) and it can be explained in terms of gender roles and gender-based socialization patterns.

The social role theory (Eagly & Wood, 2012) claims that societal expectations shape different expectations of roles from both genders that also affect their socialization. According to this perspective, girls are in general socialized to be more nurturing, emotionally expressive and empathic as compared to boys. Specifically, in traditional contexts like Pakistan these gender roles and expectations further exacerbate which explains the findings of this study where girls have scored significantly higher on those strengths which aligns with the relational and emotional values associated with being female i.e. appreciation of beauty and strength, gratitude, humility, creativity, humor, kindness, and teamwork.

The gender differences on self-regulation observed in this study has also been supported by previous literature. A possible explanation of this difference can be found in Baumeister & Vohs' (2007) self-regulation theory which posits it as a function of societal expectation towards emotional awareness and expression for both genders. In traditional societies, like Pakistan with prominently collectivistic cultural orientation there are distinct expectations from boys and girls in terms of their roles. Boys are usually encouraged in such contexts to be more self-reliant and to exhibit greater self-control on their emotions and behavior to meet gender norms that prioritize discipline, control and assertiveness among them as compared to girls.

These differences can also be explained through biological 'theory of empathizing-systemizing' (Baron & Cohen, 2003). This theory suggests that girls are more likely to excel in empathizing thus having greater emotional awareness, understanding and social bodings as compared to boys who are more align towards systemizing or logical problem-solving. All findings along with the theoretical explanations generate useful insights about the trends of character strengths in diverse

populations. The similarities with previous literature provide support for the ubiquity of the strengths whereas the unique differences highlight the effect of socio-cultural aspects on manifestation of these trends.

Besides its useful implications, this study had few limitations; it didn't tap into the familial or other psychosocial factors that might have led to these differences in the trends of character strengths. Therefore, it calls for a closer look in future studies at assessing the underlying interpersonal and intrapersonal factors that might affect these patterns of character strengths.

Conclusion.

This study has attempted to explain the trends of character strengths among adolescents in Pakistani context. Findings revealed a unique profile including strengths related to meaning making and higher connection as well as the cognitive and interpersonal strengths appearing as the most prominent while strengths of self, civic and emotions appearing as the lowest. This contextual manifestation and gender-based differences can be used further in devising/adapting interventions that can build on existing strengths of Pakistani adolescents while fostering the lowest ranked strengths to promote a balanced outlook unique to the needs of this population.

Acknowledgement

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