

A Descriptive and Comparative Study of University Students' Character Strength Profiles in a Collectivistic Cultural Context

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ABSTRACT: Character strengths are central constructs in positive psychology, yet empirical evidence from collectivistic cultural contexts remains limited. This study aims to examine the distribution of the 24 character strengths and to compare character strength profiles between male and female university students. The participants consisted of 285 undergraduate students recruited from several private universities in Semarang, Indonesia, using an incidental sampling technique. The research instrument was the 72-item Values in Action Inventory of Strengths (VIA-72) developed by Peterson and Seligman (2004). Validity testing using Corrected Item–Total Correlation indicated that all items met the validity criteria, with correlation coefficients ranging from 0.320 to 0.661. Reliability analysis demonstrated excellent internal consistency, with a Cronbach's Alpha of 0.966. Data were analyzed using descriptive and comparative statistical methods. Descriptive findings revealed that kindness, teamwork, appreciation of beauty and excellence, gratitude, and fairness were the five highest character strengths across the total sample. Specifically, male students showed the highest scores in teamwork, kindness, fairness, appreciation of beauty and excellence, and humor, whereas female students scored highest in kindness, gratitude, appreciation of beauty and excellence, teamwork, and fairness. Comparative analysis using the Mann–Whitney U test identified statistically significant gender differences in four character strengths – open-mindedness, bravery, social intelligence, and humor – although the observed effect sizes ranged from small to moderate. These findings contribute to a deeper understanding of university students' character strength profiles within the Indonesian higher education context and offer practical implications for the development of strength-based student interventions and educational programs.

KEYWORDS: Character Strengths; VIA Classification; Collectivistic Culture; Gender Differences; University Students

1. INTRODUCTION

Over the past two decades, positive psychology has emerged as a prominent scientific paradigm for understanding human well-being, optimal functioning, and the psychological capacities that enable individuals to thrive (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). In contrast to traditional psychological approaches that have primarily emphasized deficits, disorders, and pathology, positive psychology focuses on human strengths, virtues, and adaptive resources as essential components of healthy development and flourishing (Peterson, 2006; Rashid & Seligman, 2019).

One of the most influential contributions of positive psychology is the *Values in Action* (VIA) Classification of Character Strengths and Virtues, developed by Peterson and Seligman (2004). This framework identifies 24 character strengths organized under six universal virtues: wisdom and knowledge, courage, humanity, justice, temperance, and transcendence. Character strengths are conceptualized as morally valued positive traits reflected in consistent patterns of thought, emotion, and behavior that contribute to optimal functioning. Virtues, in turn, represent higher-order moral ideals that are recognized across cultures as foundations of a good and meaningful life. Within the VIA framework, virtues provide overarching moral categories, whereas character strengths constitute their concrete behavioral manifestations in everyday life. Together, they offer a comprehensive conceptual foundation for understanding healthy character development in both personal and social domains.

Peterson and Seligman (2004) further elaborated the six virtues and their associated character strengths. The virtue of wisdom and knowledge includes creativity, curiosity, judgment (open-mindedness), love of learning, and perspective. Courage encompasses bravery, perseverance, honesty, and zest. Humanity comprises love, kindness, and social intelligence, while justice includes teamwork, fairness, and leadership. Temperance consists of forgiveness, humility, prudence, and self-regulation, and transcendence includes appreciation of beauty and excellence, gratitude, hope, humor, and spirituality. These character strengths

A Descriptive and Comparative Study of University Students' Character Strength Profiles in a Collectivistic Cultural Context

are considered relatively stable yet malleable psychological qualities that can be cultivated through education and intentional interventions.

A growing body of empirical research has demonstrated that character strengths are positively associated with a wide range of adaptive outcomes, including subjective well-being, life satisfaction, quality of interpersonal relationships, academic motivation, and performance (Niemic, 2018; Wagner et al., 2020). In educational contexts, character strengths such as self-regulation, perseverance, prudence, open-mindedness, love of learning, and perspective have been shown to predict academic achievement, persistence, and resilience in the face of academic challenges (Credé et al., 2017; Duckworth & Seligman, 2005). These strengths support effective learning strategies, sustained effort, and adaptive coping within demanding academic environments.

In addition to academically oriented strengths, interpersonal character strengths play a critical role in students' success within collaborative learning settings. Strengths associated with the virtue of humanity—such as kindness and social intelligence—and teamwork as an expression of the virtue of justice facilitate positive peer relationships, ethical collaboration, and constructive group functioning (Gillham et al., 2011). As higher education increasingly emphasizes project-based learning, teamwork, and social engagement, these interpersonal strengths have become central to students' academic and psychosocial adjustment.

Beyond academic outcomes, character strengths also function as psychological resources that buffer against stress and emotional difficulties. Previous studies indicate that stronger character profiles are associated with lower levels of academic stress, better emotional regulation, and reduced risk of burnout (Shoshani & Slone, 2013). From this perspective, character strengths contribute not only to performance but also to students' overall psychological well-being and long-term developmental outcomes.

Despite the rapid growth of character strengths research in Western contexts, empirical studies in non-Western and collectivistic societies remain comparatively limited. Indonesia represents a particularly relevant context for such investigation, as it is characterized by a predominantly collectivistic cultural orientation that emphasizes interpersonal harmony, social obligation, family interconnectedness, and communal values such as *gotong royong* (mutual cooperation) (Hofstede et al., 2011; Koentjaraningrat, 2009). Cultural values of this kind may shape both the salience and expression of specific character strengths. For example, strengths related to interpersonal concern and group cohesion—such as kindness, teamwork, and fairness—may be more strongly emphasized than strengths associated with individual autonomy, self-assertion, or creative self-expression.

Several studies conducted in Indonesia have begun to explore character strengths in relation to psychological well-being, friendship quality, and academic adjustment (Indrawati & Rahmandani, 2020; Listiyandini et al., 2015; Suharsono & Priyanto, 2024). However, much of this research has been limited by partial coverage of character strengths, relatively small samples, or a lack of systematic gender-based analysis. Consequently, comprehensive examinations of all 24 VIA character strengths among Indonesian university students remain scarce.

Gender differences constitute an important area of inquiry within character strengths research. Cross-cultural studies generally suggest that women tend to score higher on relational and emotional strengths such as love, gratitude, kindness, and empathy, whereas men often report higher levels of strengths such as bravery, humor, and leadership (Heintz et al., 2019; Linley et al., 2007). These patterns are often attributed to gender role socialization processes and culturally embedded expectations regarding masculine and feminine behavior (Eagly & Wood, 2012). However, evidence also indicates that gender differences in psychological traits are typically small, and that similarities between men and women often outweigh differences (Hyde, 2005).

Within collectivistic societies such as Indonesia, gender-based differentiation in character strengths may be further attenuated by shared cultural norms that emphasize relational harmony and collective responsibility for both men and women. Nevertheless, empirical evidence on gender differences in character strengths among Indonesian university students remains limited, highlighting the need for systematic investigation.

Mapping character strength profiles among university students is particularly important for higher education practice. Such mapping provides an empirical foundation for strength-based curricula that foster intrinsic motivation, engagement, and personal growth (Louis, 2011). It also supports counseling and academic guidance services by promoting a potential-oriented approach rather than a deficit-focused model (Smith, 2020). Furthermore, strength-based education aligns closely with national mandates for character education within Indonesian higher education institutions. Empirical data on students' character strengths thus represent a strategic resource for intervention development, institutional policy, and the enhancement of student psychological services.

Based on these considerations, the present study aims to (1) describe the distribution of the 24 character strengths among Indonesian university students, identifying the most and least prominent strengths; (2) examine dominant character strength profiles by gender; and (3) discuss the theoretical and practical implications of these findings within a collectivistic cultural context. Although academic achievement was not directly examined as an outcome variable, understanding students' character strength profiles provides a critical foundation for future research on the role of character strengths in academic success and student well-being. Through this approach, the study seeks to contribute to the growing body of positive psychology research in Indonesia and to support the development of culturally sensitive, strength-based educational practices in higher education.

A Descriptive and Comparative Study of University Students' Character Strength Profiles in a Collectivistic Cultural Context

2. METODOLOGY

This study employed a quantitative approach with a descriptive and comparative design to describe the distribution of character strengths and to examine gender-based differences among university students. This design was chosen to provide a comprehensive profile of character strengths while allowing for statistical comparison between male and female students. The study population consisted of undergraduate students enrolled in private universities in Semarang, Indonesia. Participants were recruited using an incidental sampling technique. The final sample included 285 students, comprising 75 male and 210 female students, aged between 18 and 23 years (M age $\approx$ early adulthood range). This age group corresponds to the developmental phase of emerging adulthood, characterized by identity exploration and psychosocial transition.

Character strengths were measured using the Values in Action Inventory of Strengths (VIA-IS), 72-item version, developed by Peterson and Seligman (2004). The instrument assesses 24 character strengths, with each strength represented by three items. Responses were recorded on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (*very uncharacteristic of me*) to 5 (*very characteristic of me*), with higher scores indicating greater endorsement of a given strength. Validity testing using Corrected Item–Total Correlation showed that all 72 items met the validity criterion, with correlation coefficients ranging from 0.320 to 0.661. Reliability analysis demonstrated excellent internal consistency, with a Cronbach's Alpha of 0.966, indicating that the instrument was highly reliable for use in the present sample.

Data were collected online using a Google Forms questionnaire, which was distributed through student communication platforms, including social media and academic discussion groups, to maximize participation. Prior to completing the questionnaire, all participants provided informed consent electronically. Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the relevant faculty ethics committee. Data analysis was conducted using descriptive and inferential statistical techniques. Descriptive statistics (mean, standard deviation, minimum, and maximum scores) were computed to describe the distribution of each character strength. Gender-based comparisons were analyzed using the Mann–Whitney U test, due to non-normal distribution assumptions. Additionally, effect sizes (r) were calculated to evaluate the practical magnitude of observed differences.

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Descriptive Statistics of Character Strengths

Descriptive analyses were conducted to examine the distribution of scores across the 24 character strengths among Indonesian university students. The results revealed a clear pattern in which several interpersonal and relational strengths emerged as the most prominent, whereas strengths related to reflective judgment and self-regulation tended to be lower. Across the total sample, the five highest-ranked character strengths were kindness ($M = 12.88$, $SD = 1.73$), teamwork ($M = 12.74$, $SD = 1.82$), appreciation of beauty and excellence ($M = 12.68$, $SD = 1.90$), gratitude ($M = 12.65$, $SD = 2.16$), and fairness ($M = 12.54$, $SD = 2.02$). Among these, kindness emerged as the most prominent character strength overall. In contrast, the five lowest-ranked character strengths were perspective ($M = 10.34$, $SD = 2.30$), love of learning ($M = 10.46$, $SD = 2.78$), self-regulation ($M = 10.72$, $SD = 2.40$), zest ($M = 11.05$, $SD = 2.47$), and creativity ($M = 11.21$, $SD = 2.16$). Perspective showed the lowest mean score among all strengths assessed. Table 1 presents the five highest character strengths, while Table 2 summarizes the five lowest character strengths observed in the sample.

TABLE 1. Five Highest Character Strengths

Rank	Character Strength	Mean (M)	SD
1	Kindness	12.88	1.73
2	Teamwork	12.74	1.82
3	Appreciation of Beauty & Excellence	12.68	1.90
4	Gratitude	12.65	2.16
5	Fairness	12.54	2.02

TABLE 2. Five Lowest Character Strengths

Rank	Character Strength	Mean (M)	SD
1	Perspective	10.34	2.30
2	Love of Learning	10.46	2.78
3	Self-Regulation	10.72	2.40
4	Zest	11.05	2.47
5	Creativity	11.21	2.16

A Descriptive and Comparative Study of University Students' Character Strength Profiles in a Collectivistic Cultural Context

3.2 Dominant Character Strengths by Gender

Gender-specific descriptive analyses were conducted to examine similarities and differences in the ranking of dominant character strengths between male and female students. Overall, both groups exhibited highly similar profiles, particularly with respect to interpersonal strengths. Among male students, the five highest-ranked character strengths were teamwork ($M = 12.93$), kindness ($M = 12.79$), fairness ($M = 12.65$), appreciation of beauty and excellence ($M = 12.63$), and humor ($M = 12.60$). Among female students, the five highest-ranked character strengths were kindness ($M = 12.91$), gratitude ($M = 12.72$), appreciation of beauty and excellence ($M = 12.70$), teamwork ($M = 12.68$), and fairness ($M = 12.50$). Although the same interpersonal strengths appeared prominently in both groups, differences were observed in their relative ordering. Specifically, humor ranked among the top five strengths for male students, whereas gratitude ranked more prominently among female students. Detailed results are presented in Table 3.

TABLE 3. Five Dominant Character Strengths by Gender

Rank	Male Students	Mean	Female Students	Mean
1	Teamwork	12.93	Kindness	12.91
2	Kindness	12.79	Gratitude	12.72
3	Fairness	12.65	Appreciation of Beauty & Excellence	12.70
4	Appreciation of Beauty & Excellence	12.63	Teamwork	12.68
5	Humor	12.60	Fairness	12.50

3.3. Comparative Analysis of Gender Differences

To examine gender-based differences in character strength scores, Mann–Whitney U tests were conducted for all 24 character strengths. The results indicated that most character strengths did not differ significantly by gender, suggesting largely similar character strength profiles between male and female students. However, four character strengths showed statistically significant gender differences, with male students scoring higher than female students in all cases. These strengths were open-mindedness ($Z = -1.979$, $p = .048$), bravery ($Z = -2.930$, $p = .003$), social intelligence ($Z = -2.029$, $p = .042$), and humor ($Z = -3.166$, $p = .002$). Despite reaching statistical significance, the associated effect sizes (r) were small, indicating that the magnitude of these gender differences was limited in practical terms. A summary of the significant gender differences is presented in Table 4.

TABLE 4. Significant Gender Differences in Character Strengths

No.	Character Strength	Z	p	Direction
1	Open-mindedness	-1.979	.048	Male > Female
2	Bravery	-2.930	.003	Male > Female
3	Social Intelligence	-2.029	.042	Male > Female
4	Humor	-3.166	.002	Male > Female

3.4 Character Strength Profiles in a Collectivistic Cultural Context

The present study aimed to describe the distribution of the 24 character strengths among Indonesian university students and to examine gender-based differences within a collectivistic cultural context. Overall, the findings reveal a clear dominance of interpersonal character strengths, minimal gender differentiation, and a pattern that appears to be shaped more strongly by cultural and developmental factors than by gender alone.

The predominance of kindness as the highest-ranked character strength is theoretically consistent with the VIA framework, in which kindness represents a central expression of the virtue of humanity, encompassing empathy, care, and prosocial behavior (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). In the Indonesian context, kindness is not merely an individual disposition but a socially reinforced value embedded in family socialization, educational practices, and community life. Cultural norms such as *gotong royong* (mutual cooperation), respect for interpersonal harmony, and communal responsibility provide a fertile context for the development and expression of this strength.

Similarly, the high ranking of teamwork and fairness, both associated with the virtue of justice, further reflects the collectivistic orientation of Indonesian society. Collectivistic cultures tend to emphasize cooperation, shared responsibility, and equitable treatment within the group rather than individual competition or personal distinction (Hofstede, 2001; Oyserman et al., 2002). University learning environments in Indonesia, which frequently rely on group-based assignments, organizational involvement, and collaborative learning models, likely reinforce these strengths through repeated social practice.

The prominence of gratitude and appreciation of beauty and excellence may also be understood within Indonesia's broader religious and spiritual landscape. Gratitude, a core strength under the virtue of transcendence, supports meaning-making and

A Descriptive and Comparative Study of University Students' Character Strength Profiles in a Collectivistic Cultural Context

positive emotional regulation (Peterson & Seligman, 2004; Wood et al., 2010). In Indonesian society, gratitude is often expressed through religious teachings and spiritual narratives, which frame personal experiences as part of a larger moral and existential order. This cultural framing may enhance the salience of gratitude as both a personal and collective value.

3.5 Lower-Ranked Strengths and Developmental Considerations

In contrast, strengths such as perspective, love of learning, self-regulation, zest, and creativity emerged as relatively less prominent. These strengths are primarily associated with the virtues of wisdom and temperance, which require reflective judgment, autonomous motivation, long-term goal orientation, and mature self-regulatory capacities. The relatively lower scores on these strengths may be partly explained by the developmental characteristics of the sample.

The participants were predominantly aged 18–23 years, corresponding to the developmental phase of emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2000, 2015). This period is characterized by identity exploration, instability, and gradual consolidation of self-regulatory and reflective capacities. Strengths such as perspective and self-regulation often continue to develop across early adulthood as individuals gain greater life experience, autonomy, and responsibility.

Cultural factors may further interact with developmental processes. In collectivistic societies, individual exploration, intellectual autonomy, and creative self-expression may receive less explicit reinforcement compared to relational adjustment and social conformity (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Heine, 2016). Additionally, educational systems that prioritize formal achievement, compliance with academic structures, and examination performance may unintentionally limit opportunities for curiosity-driven learning and creative exploration. Together, these cultural and institutional factors may contribute to the relatively lower salience of wisdom- and temperance-related strengths among students.

3.6 Gender Similarities in Character Strength Profiles

Gender-based analyses revealed that male and female students exhibited largely similar character strength profiles, particularly with respect to interpersonal strengths such as kindness, teamwork, and fairness. This finding aligns with the gender similarities hypothesis, which posits that psychological similarities between men and women are substantially greater than differences (Hyde, 2005; Zell et al., 2015).

Within a collectivistic cultural context, shared social norms emphasizing harmony, respect, and group responsibility may act as powerful socializing forces that reduce gender differentiation in character expression. Both male and female students are encouraged to conform to relational expectations, thereby fostering similar patterns of interpersonal strengths across genders.

Differences in the relative ranking of humor (more prominent among males) and gratitude (more prominent among females) are better interpreted as differences in expressive emphasis rather than fundamental structural differences. Previous research suggests that men are more likely to express socially outward positive emotions such as humor, whereas women tend to express reflective and relational emotions such as gratitude (Martin et al., 2003; Nolen-Hoeksema, 2012). Importantly, these differences do not contradict the overall similarity in character strength profiles observed in this study.

3.7 Statistically Significant Gender Differences and Their Meaning

The Mann–Whitney U analysis identified statistically significant gender differences in open-mindedness, bravery, social intelligence, and humor, with higher scores among male students. However, the observed effect sizes were small, indicating limited practical significance. This pattern reinforces the interpretation that gender differences, while statistically detectable, are modest in magnitude.

From a sociocultural perspective, these differences may reflect gender role socialization processes in which men are encouraged to demonstrate assertiveness, risk-taking, and public social engagement (Eagly & Wood, 2012). Nevertheless, the small effect sizes suggest that collectivistic cultural norms emphasizing cohesion and interpersonal adjustment constrain the extent to which gender roles translate into substantial differences in character strengths.

3.8 Theoretical and Practical Implications

The findings contribute to positive psychology by providing culturally grounded evidence that character strength profiles are shaped by the interaction of universal moral constructs and local sociocultural contexts. While the VIA classification proposes universality in the structure of character strengths, the present results highlight variability in their relative salience across cultural settings. This supports a contextualized understanding of character strengths that integrates universal frameworks with cultural psychology perspectives.

From a practical standpoint, the dominance of interpersonal strengths among Indonesian university students represents a valuable resource for educational and counseling interventions. Strength-based programs can leverage existing strengths such as kindness, teamwork, and fairness as entry points for developing less prominent strengths related to self-regulation, reflective thinking, and autonomous learning. Such an approach aligns with culturally sensitive character education and avoids deficit-oriented models.

A Descriptive and Comparative Study of University Students' Character Strength Profiles in a Collectivistic Cultural Context

3.9 Limitations and Future Directions

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the use of incidental sampling and a sample drawn from private universities in a single city limits the generalizability of the findings. Second, the cross-sectional design precludes conclusions about developmental change over time. Third, reliance on self-report measures may be influenced by social desirability, particularly in collectivistic contexts.

Future research should employ longitudinal designs to examine the developmental trajectories of character strengths across emerging adulthood, include more diverse institutional and regional samples, and integrate qualitative or mixed-method approaches to capture culturally nuanced expressions of character strengths. Examining the relationship between character strengths and academic outcomes within Indonesian higher education also represents a promising avenue for further investigation.

4. CONCLUSION

This study provides empirical evidence on the profile of character strengths among Indonesian university students within a collectivistic cultural context. The findings indicate a clear predominance of interpersonal character strengths, particularly kindness, teamwork, and fairness, which are aligned with the virtues of humanity and justice in the VIA framework. This pattern reflects the strong influence of cultural values emphasizing social harmony, communal responsibility, and relational interconnectedness. Gender-based analyses revealed that male and female students displayed largely similar character strength profiles. Although several strengths—open-mindedness, bravery, social intelligence, and humor – showed statistically significant differences favoring male students, the small effect sizes suggest that these differences are limited in practical significance. Overall, the results support the gender similarities hypothesis and highlight the role of collectivistic cultural norms in shaping character development beyond gender distinctions. Furthermore, the relatively lower prominence of strengths associated with wisdom and temperance may be understood through the combined influence of developmental factors characteristic of emerging adulthood and educational contexts that prioritize formal achievement over autonomous exploration. These findings underscore the importance of considering culture and developmental stage when interpreting character strength profiles. Taken together, this study reinforces the cross-cultural relevance of the VIA classification while emphasizing that the salience and expression of character strengths are context-dependent. Practically, the results suggest that character education and strength-based interventions in Indonesian higher education should build upon existing interpersonal strengths while intentionally fostering self-regulatory, reflective, and exploratory capacities. Such an approach may support students' holistic development as both competent individuals and socially responsible members of society.

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A Descriptive and Comparative Study of University Students' Character Strength Profiles in a Collectivistic Cultural Context

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