

## **Character Strengths and Positive Outcomes**

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### **Abstract**

Character strengths have been defined as positive traits associated with individual differences. It has been explored as part of the personality that contributes to well-being, happiness and flourishing. This paper provides a review of the VIA Classification of character strengths and the relationships between character strengths and positive outcomes. Previous research shows that different character strengths predict different outcomes. From the review, character strengths have been found to generally increase life satisfaction, flourishing and leadership. Character strengths also have significant relationships with coping with stress, mastering online education system and recovering from addiction behaviour. Most of the studies were conducted in Western countries across a variety of population. The review highlights the importance of studying character strengths, especially in less studied samples such as Malaysia.

**Keywords:** Positive psychology, character strengths, flourishing, Generation Z

### **1. Introduction**

Character strength is an important construct in positive psychology. The importance of character strength was first established by Csikszentmihalyi during World War II. Csikszentmihalyi noticed a small group of people who were able to keep their integrity and continue to thrive when others turned hopeless and dispirited when the war removed their social supports (Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Csikszentmihalyi argues that it is these positive aspects of the personality which guide a person to be flourishing when others do not. Character strengths are unique and different from other personal strengths such as individual skills, special talents, interests because they reflected the core of each person. Several positive outcomes had been associated with character strengths such as life satisfaction, flourishing, leadership, coping with stress and etc. In the present paper, the 6 virtues and 24 character strengths are discussed; and a review on the relationships between character strengths and positive outcomes is presented.

### **2. Character Strengths**

Character strengths have been studied as the part of the human's natural and unique strengths and they hold an important role in psychological good life. Furthermore, character strengths also been recognized as positive traits that play an important role in development of happiness, well being, and flourishing life. This led Martin Seligman and Christopher Peterson to conduct a project by involving 55 other distinguished scholars and clinicians to study and classify character strengths (Peterson and Seligman, 2004). They then categorised and classified the construct into 6 virtues and 24 character strengths.

Eventually, the virtues were the product of a review of philosophical text and eight cultural traditions: Confucianism, Taoism, Buddhism, Hinduism, Athenian philosophy, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam (Dahlsgaard, Peterson and Seligman, 2005). The outcome was designed as to provide an all-inclusive model of character strengths. However, output of the classification

as represented by a structural model and served as to demonstrate distinct development processes is uncommon in psychology. Thus Peterson and Seligman (2004) continued to make further adjustment to the classification in subsequent research.

Everyone possesses all twenty-four elements of the VIA character strengths but they have them in varying degrees and this make up unique profiles a person. The full description of VIA character strengths is listed as below:

Table 1: VIA Classification of Character Strengths

Virtues	Character Strengths
1. Wisdom and Knowledge	<p>Cognitive strengths that result in obtaining and use of knowledge. This classification involves creativity, curiosity, judgement, love of learning, and perspective.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <b>Creativity:</b> recognized as originality and ingenuity, described as valuable ways to conceptualize and do things.</li> <li>- <b>Curiosity:</b> referred as interest, novelty-seeking and openness to experience. Concerned with current experience for its own advantages, and try to explore and discover more.</li> <li>- <b>Judgment:</b> required critical thinking in thinking through and examining issues from all areas, not making any conclusion before weighing all evidence fairly.</li> <li>- <b>Love of learning:</b> referred to desire to master new skills, topics, and body language, whether on one-self own or formally.</li> <li>- <b>Perspective:</b> perspective from wisdom, being able to provide sensible advice to others; discover ways in interpreting the world in a way that makes sense to oneself and to others.</li> </ul>
2. Courage	<p>Emotional strengths evolve the practice of will to achieve goals in the face of competition, externally or internally.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <b>Courage or bravery:</b> acted in a way that is not declining from threat, challenge, difficulty, or pain and talk about the right even though the opposition exist</li> <li>- <b>Persistence:</b> Determination in accomplishing what one starts and undertake the pleasure in completing tasks.</li> <li>- <b>Honesty, truthfulness and integrity:</b> telling the truth but more broadly presenting oneself in a genuine way and acting in a sincere way.</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <b>Zest</b>: approaching life with excitement and vigour and takes life as an adventure to feel alive and motivated.</li> </ul>
3. Humanity	<p>Interpersonal strengths that requires encouraging others.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <b>Love</b>: be able to adore and form close relations with others, in particular those in which sharing and caring are corresponded.</li> <li>- <b>Kindness and “niceness”</b>: being able to do favours and good deeds for others.</li> <li>- <b>Social, emotional and personal intelligence</b>: own the ability to be alert of the motives and feelings of other people and oneself and aware of what associated with different social situations.</li> </ul>
4. Justice	<p>Civic strengths that produce a healthy community life.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <b>Teamwork</b>: which also known as citizenship, social responsibility and loyalty. Able to work as a team and shows loyalty to the team.</li> <li>- <b>Fairness</b>: consider the same to all people by referring to notions of fairness and justice; yet avoid bias decisions about others.</li> <li>- <b>Leadership</b>: motivating a team member to accomplish task and maintaining time good relations within the group simultaneously; also, organizing group functions and make them happen.</li> </ul>
5. Moderation	<p>Control strengths in balancing life.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <b>Ability of forgiveness</b>: Forgive and give another chance to make mistake and accept the weakness of others.</li> <li>- <b>Humility</b>: Not regarding oneself as more special than one is.</li> <li>- <b>Caution</b>: Being alert with choices and avoid of saying or doing things that might later be regretted.</li> <li>- <b>Self-Regulation and self-control</b>: manage and control one's feeling, action, appetites and emotions.</li> </ul>
6. Transcendence	<p>Connect strengths that produce association with the larger universe and contribute meaning.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <b>Appreciation of Beauty and Excellence</b> [awe, wonder, elevation]: Noticing and appreciating beauty, excellence, and skilled performance in various domains of life, from nature to art to mathematics to science to everyday experience</li> </ul>

- **Gratitude:** Being alert and thankful for the great things that occur and manage to express thanks.
  - **Hope:** Expecting the best in the future and working to achieve it; believing that a good future is something that can be brought about
  - **Humor:** Bring happiness to surrounding by laugh and tease and making jokes.
  - **Spirituality:** own beliefs about the meaning of life that shape conduct and provide comfort.
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Source: Park and Peterson, 2009

VIA Classification of Strengths, 2004 cited in Park and Peterson, 2009, p.2.

The twenty-four character strengths exist in every individual but are different in ranking. For example, some people have higher level of creativity but lower level of kindness. A number of research have been conducted with application of these 24 character strengths and suggested that it is possible to distinguish character strengths of different groups of people such as adult and youth group (Park and Peterson, 2006b; Park, Peterson and Seligman, 2006).

As according to Park, Peterson and Seligman (2006), character strengths study and measurement was started on adult group. Most prevalent character strengths reported around the world are (from most to least): kindness, fairness, honesty, gratitude, judgment, prudence, modesty, and self-regulation (Park, Peterson and Seligman, 2006). In Park and Peterson (2006b) investigation on samples from the United State, they found that youth owns demonstrated more on character strengths of related to hope, teamwork, zest while adults are more on appreciation of beauty & excellence, honesty, leadership and open-mindedness.

In Shimai, et al. (2006) research, young adults from the United States and Japan which represent western and eastern country respectively showed similar distributions of the 24 strengths. The higher strengths included love, humour and kindness, and lesser strengths included prudence, self-regulation, and modesty. In addition, young people showed interest to practice character strengths in their life. This is evidence from a study conducted in 20 different high school classrooms in Michigan which examined interest, practice and belief about character strengths from student's perspective (Steen, Kachorek and Peterson, 2003). Students were interested in the subject of good characters and were able to discuss with candour and sophistication instances of the strengths through a formal focus group discussion. They were especially drawn to the positive traits of leadership, practical intelligence, wisdom, social intelligence, love of learning, spirituality, and the capacity to love and be loved.

### 3. Character Strengths and Positive Outcomes

Character strengths have been associated with several positive outcomes. They are discussed in the following sections

### 3.1. Character Strengths and Flourishing

Character strengths contribute to subjective well-being such as happiness and life satisfaction. According to Well-Being Theory by Martin Seligman, well-being can be measured by five elements, positive emotion, engagement, positive relationships, meaning, and accomplishment and the goal is to increase flourishing. Consequently, relationship between character strengths and well-being is also related relationship between character strengths and flourishing. Gillham, et al. (2011) research showed contribution of character strengths to adolescence well-being. Numbers of evidence reflected that significant character strengths such as hope, kindness, social intelligence, self-control, and perspective lead to well being in life by the ability to defense undesirable emotions, stress and trauma (Park and Peterson, 2006b). In addition, character strengths can assist young people to thrive and accomplish goals. This is evidenced from a study by Scales, Benson and Leffert (2000) which found that good characters contributed to positive outcomes such as school achievement, leadership, resilience, prolonger enjoyment, kindness and altruism. These investigations had shown that character strengths can increase flourishing level of an individual.

### 3.2. Character Strengths and Life Satisfaction

One of the most important variables that had been studied in positive psychology is life satisfaction. As a result, strong and relevant evident have been established to support the relationship between character strengths and life satisfaction. More specifically, character strengths which had shown to have a consistent and powerful relationship with life satisfaction are love, curiosity, hope, gratitude and zest (Park, Peterson and Seligman, 2004). Research recommended that greatness such as gratitude, meaning, and hope could also anticipate life satisfaction.

According to Theory of Authentic Happiness, the goal of happiness is to increase life satisfaction (Seligman, 2011). Hence, increase in happiness will consequently increase level of life satisfaction. Researcher investigated and found that character strengths have highest correlation with happiness. These characters were zest, religiousness, curiosity, gratitude and hope. In addition, character strengths associated most with engagement which then lead to happiness are curiosity, perseverance, zest, hope, and perspective; while character strength most associated with pleasure are hope, social intelligence, humour, zest and love (Peterson et al., 2007).

### 3.3. Character Strengths and Leadership

Character of a leader is a fundamental element in leadership. Researchers investigated and discovered important characters which lead to good leadership and they are honesty, trustworthiness, and integrity (Treviño, Brown and Hartman, 2003). These character strengths matters in leadership as they provide a moral compass that guides the leaders and organization to the best path to reach common goals and personal development (Treviño, Brown and Hartman, 2003). Research also indicated that character strengths of courage and authenticity among successful leaders lead them to connect with the people in his/her team (Kolzow, 2014). Hence, honesty and integrity made importance contributing in building leadership.

### 3.4. Character Strengths and Coping with Stress

Character strengths are also helpful resources to cope with stress in workplace and to reduce the negative effects of stress. Previous research found out the there is a relationships between

character strengths and recovering from illness and trauma (Harzer and Ruch, 2015). Studies also revealed that character strengths have positive relationship with job satisfaction (Peterson et al., 2010). These results showed correlations between character strengths and stress coping behaviour. Besides, Peterson research also indicated that character strengths can promote direct relationship with positive coping strategies by contributing to individual fulfilment (Peterson, 2006). As character strengths can be taught, it can be enhanced during challenging situations such as illness, trauma and stress.

### 3.5. Character Strengths and Mastering Online Education System

Character strengths are found to be connected to education system. Occurrence of educational technology had brought to versatile online program for students. Online learning which also recognized as massive open online course (MOOC) first introduced in 2006 and become popular mode of learning in 2012 (Allen and Seaman, 2013). In Malaysia, Taylor's University School of Engineering (SOE) is the first university to launch massive open online course (MOOC) (Al-Atabi, 2013).

New education system requires different abilities and characteristics to gain desire outcomes. Researchers found students which success in online education consists of several characteristics, especially self-regulation and cognitive strategies (Colorado and Eberle, 2010). Cheurprakobkit, Hale and Olson (2002) also emphasized the importance of self-regulated characters which combined discipline, monitoring, initiative, and management within a person. These characteristics are similar to character strength of "temperance" which deals with strengths that protect a person from excess. Temperance is a practiced ability to monitor a person emotions, motivation and behaviour without outside force.

Student who intend to master online learning technologies can practice character strength of "Love of learning". This refers to the desire to master new skills. In this study, temperance and love of learning defined as character strengths that lead to successful online education.

### 3.6. Character Strengths and Recovering From Addiction

Research had been conducted to understand about the relationship between the character strength of spirituality and addictive behaviour. Internet addiction, referred as compulsive use of internet, has been found to be related and connected to character strengths (Kuss and Lopez-Fernandez, 2016). Spirituality explained as beliefs about the meaning of life and religions. Spirituality was crucial in shape beliefs while strong belief has the ability to change undesired behaviour. Eventually, religiosity function is to protect individual from addictive behaviour (Cook, 2009) meanwhile spirituality make ease the maintenance of recovery (Miller and Bogenschutz, 2007). Spirituality provides further recovery from addiction, and even plays a higher role in maintaining recovery (Leigh, Bowen and Marlatt, 2005). Thus, spirituality is recognized as most effective character strengths in monitoring addiction behaviour. This character strength promotes its function through spiritual practices. Meditation (is an action which staying in a state of awareness and of quietness) and Silence (a practice as to rest and renewal stop on the spiritual journey) are suggested as convincing spiritual practices that can facilitate long-term recovery from substance abuse (Booth and Martin, 1998). In addition, other character strengths which are associated with recovering from addiction had been further explored and discovered. Research showed that there are ten character strengths (including spirituality) that are associated with recovery from addiction and they are: forgiveness, integrity, hope, integrity, humility, vitality, kindness, love and wisdom and spirituality (Selvam, 2015). Therefore, character strengths acted

as an important practice in recovering from addiction behaviour including internet addiction among youth.

#### 4. Conclusion

Taken together, the above review indicates that character strengths play an important role in human life. According to the investigators and previous research, character strengths can be associated with positive outcomes, such as life satisfaction, flourishing, leadership, coping with stress, mastering online education and recovering from addiction. Adults or adolescents that posed particular character strengths mentioned in the studies are likely to experience high level of flourishing, reach life satisfaction and can be potential leaders.

Yet, most of the previous studies of character strengths were conducted in Western context and limited studies have been conducted in Eastern cultures, especially Malaysia. It is important to understand the distribution of character strengths in Malaysia population especially among the young generation. Understand this can help young people to thrive in life. It is also important to understand how parents and other individuals who play a major role in the individuals' lives can cultivate character strengths. Future studies should explore all of these issues in the context of Malaysia.

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