

The Role of Character Strengths on Adolescents' Participation in Sports

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Abstract: The Values in Action (VIA) Classification of Strengths and Virtues provides a detailed assessment of character based on 24-character strengths. The current study aimed to investigate whether these character strengths play role in adolescents' participation in extracurricular activities, specifically sports. To achieve this, a demographic questionnaire and the VIA Youth Survey (96-item) were completed by 3810 adolescents in the UK. The data were analyzed using binary logistic regression, and the findings indicated that the virtues of teamwork, perseverance, leadership, spirit, and zest were predictors of participation in sports during adolescence. The results also showed significant gender differences in character strengths and participation in sports. Female students scored higher on character strengths of prudence, perseverance, kindness, and humility, while male students scored higher on creativity, spirituality, and zest. Female students were also less likely to participate in sports compared to male students. The implications of these findings for future research and practice are discussed.

Keywords: Adolescence, Character strengths, Ethical, Moral, Virtues, VIA.

INTRODUCTION

Moral character has been a topic of great interest since ancient times and is commonly understood as an internal state that is expressed through an individual's behaviors in their environment [1, 2]. According to Baumrind [3], "it takes virtuous character to will the good, and competence to do good well." It follows that without moral or good character, people might lack the desire to act well [4]. Character is also associated with groups of positive qualities that are evident in an individual's opinions, emotions, and behaviors [5]. These character strengths are valued features of a person [4], which when practiced morally can contribute to positive life outcomes [6] and aid in healthy life-long development [7]. The ideals of character and virtue as worthy features of flourishing lives have recently regained attention in educational arenas, as well as among the international public. In education, there is a growing consensus that student flourishing is the rightful goal of educational activities, with good character regarded as a necessary component of this goal [8] and so the moral formation of children has become a primary concern for educating young people [9, 10].

VIA CLASSIFICATION OF STRENGTHS AND VIRTUES

Personal attributes with a commendable social aspect are relatable to character strengths which

should also be morally regarded. As evidenced by their frequent inclusion in works of moral philosophy and religion, virtues are more fundamental dimensions of moral agency. Strengths and virtues have been arranged in hierarchical order, with the virtues being constituted by character strengths [11]. Peterson and Seligman's VIA Classification of Strengths and Virtues is a significant contribution to the literature, representing a conceptual and empirical model for defining character [12]. According to this theory, there are six generic, cross-culturally applicable virtues: Wisdom and Knowledge, Courage, Humanity, Justice, Temperance, and Transcendence (See Table 1). These virtues theoretically categorize the 24 character qualities that represent the realm of positive human traits.

The first core virtue "Wisdom and Knowledge" includes cognitive strengths that require access and use of knowledge, such as creativity, curiosity, open-mindedness, perspective, and love of learning. The next core virtue "Courage" includes emotional strengths that require the practice of will achieving goals in the face of opposition, such as bravery, perseverance, honesty, and zest. "Humanity" core virtue includes interpersonal strengths that require taking care and befriending others, such as love, kindness, and social intelligence (*i.e.*, emotional intelligence, personal intelligence). "Justice" core virtue includes civic strengths that highlight healthy community life, such as teamwork, fairness, and leadership. "Temperance" core virtue includes strengths that defend against excesses, such as forgiveness, modesty, prudence, and self-regulation. The last core virtue "Transcendence"

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Table 1: Classification of Virtues and Character Strengths

Virtues	Character strengths	Definition
Wisdom and Knowledge	Creativity (originality, ingenuity)	Thinking of novel and productive ways to do things
	Curiosity (interest, novelty-seeking, openness to experience)	Taking an interest in all of ongoing experience
	Judgement & Open-Mindedness (critical thinking)	Thinking things through and examining them from all sides
	Love of Learning	Mastering new skills, topics, and bodies of knowledge
	Perspective (wisdom)	Being able to provide wise counsel to others
Courage	Bravery (valor)	Not shrinking from threat, challenge, difficulty, or pain
	Perseverance (persistence, industriousness)	Finishing what one starts
	Honesty (authenticity, integrity)	Speaking the truth and presenting oneself in a genuine way
	Zest (vitality, enthusiasm, vigor, energy)	Approaching life with excitement and energy
Humanity	Capacity to Love and Be Loved	Valuing close relations with others
	Kindness (generosity, nurturance, care, compassion, altruistic love, 'niceness')	Doing favors and good deeds for others
	Social Intelligence (emotional intelligence, personal intelligence)	Being aware of the motives and feelings of self and others
Justice	Teamwork (citizenship, social responsibility, loyalty)	Working well as member of a group or team
	Fairness	Treating all people the same according to notions of fairness and justice
	Leadership	Organizing group activities and seeing that they happen
Temperance	Forgiveness & Mercy	Forgiving those who have done wrong
	Modesty & Humility	Letting one's accomplishments speak for themselves
	Prudence	Being careful about one's choices; not saying or doing things that might later be regretted
	Self-Regulation (self-control)	Regulating what one feels and does
Transcendence	Appreciation of Beauty and Excellence (awe, wonder, elevation)	Noticing and appreciating beauty, excellence, and/or skilled performance in all domains of life
	Gratitude	Being aware of and thankful for the good things that happen
	Hope (optimism, future-mindedness, future orientation)	Expecting the best and working to achieve it
	Humor (playfulness)	Liking to laugh and joke; bringing smiles to other people
	Religiousness & Spirituality (faith, purpose)	Having coherent beliefs about the higher purpose and meaning of life

Note: Terms in brackets are alternatives of the character strength [12]

Character strengths were defined by VIA Institute on Character [15]

includes strengths that compose associations to the larger universe and provide meaning, such as appreciation of beauty and excellence, gratitude, hope, humor, and religiousness [13-15].

The VIA-Youth survey is used to identify character strengths that individuals endorse. The highest levels of endorsement equate to a person's signature strengths, according to positive psychologists. This knowledge has been used to design interventions that take advantage of these strengths and their expression [14]. For instance, many expressed character strengths

are related to positive feelings [16] and influence subjective well-being [17] life satisfaction [18, 19], school life, and academic success [20]. However, caution is needed to avoid over-emphasizing character strengths if some may be used toward poor ends. For example, strengths of persistence are equally useful for a determined criminal.

CHARACTER STRENGTHS AND SPORTS IN ADOLESCENCE

Physical inactivity and a sedentary lifestyle among students are global health concerns in both developed

[21] and developing countries [22]. Previous studies have found a link between adolescents' sport participation and factors such as gender, school climate, socioeconomic status, sociodemographic characteristics, weight status, and/or self-efficacy [23-26]. Other factors related to adolescent sports participation include a sense of belonging to a group, recognition, enjoyment, fitness, skill improvement, and excitement [27]. Sports are an integral part of many societies, with reported benefits for health, fitness, socialization, and stress management. Sports have also been associated with character building or development [28-30] and have been negatively related to school dropout and delinquent behaviors in youth [1, 31]. For instance, students who participate in extracurricular activities, such as sports, have been found to have less drug use, lower drop-out rates in school, and fewer discipline problems [32]. In addition to the decrease in negative behaviors, studies show that individuals who engage in sports develop positive peer relationships, become competitive, respect rules, and display courage and leadership [33, 34]. However, other studies report a negative connection between character development and sports participation [35, 36]. In a study of 400 college students, student-athletes and students in physical education majors received lower scores on moral reasoning and moral judgments than those students in other majors [37]. Athletes have also been reported to behave aggressively towards opponents and violate rules during games [36, 38] possibly because of feeling pressure to win. Overall, character strengths offer opportunity as a foundation for positive adolescent flourishing [39] such as learning about character strengths through sports [40, 41]. However, the culture of sports can include aggression and flexible moral codes [30] which can negatively influence character development. For example, athletes might perceive sport as different from real life justifying lapses of moral responsibility inherent to sport participation [42]. Thus, previous studies regarding character strengths and sports either examine the effects of some factors on participation in sports [43, 44] or how sport participation influences the development of character [45, 46]. No study has been found predicting sports participation from character strengths. This study aims to explore whether adolescents' character strengths can play role in participation or nonparticipation in extracurricular activities, such as sports, using the VIA-Youth as a measurement tool.

Character strengths are likely to show systematic differences across adolescence prior to stabilizing in

adulthood [47]. Some scholars believe that even adult character strengths continue to exhibit plasticity over the years [48]. Although the literature on the development of character strengths in youth is scarce, some cross-sectional studies have shown relations between strengths and age [49]. For example, leadership character strengths were found to be significantly higher in older adolescents compared to younger ones [20]. In a longitudinal study, virtues of humanity and justice tended to exhibit an upward trend between the ages of 12 and 14 years of age [50].

Demonstrations of character qualities differ between male and female youths throughout adolescence, depending on the roles they continue to assume as they enter adulthood. Typically, female youths outscore males on character strengths across adolescence [13, 51]. A recent meta-analysis indicated that females scored higher than males in appreciation of beauty and excellence, kindness, love, and gratitude [51]. In one study, females scored higher in the strengths of integrity, kindness, love, gratitude, and fairness, while men scored higher in gratitude, integrity, hope, humor, and curiosity [18]. Another study found young females to have higher strengths of kindness than males, and young males to have higher creativity [52]. Manifestations of these character strengths are aligned with female sociality that highlights 'tend-and-befriend' others [53] in contrast to male sociality that can be based on dominance hierarchies in adolescence [54, 55]. Previous studies also showed that female students were more able than male students to identify appropriate moral judgments in response to realistic moral dilemmas [56] and received significantly higher scores on moral dilemma tests for adolescents [57].

Maintaining adolescent girls' involvement in sport and physical activity is challenging [58]. The Committee on Sport and Leisure of the International Council of Sport Science and Physical Education (ICSSPE) reported trends in youth sports in 20 countries around the world. According to their report, girls lacked continued participation in sports, and they were less active than boys, particularly in traditional and team sports that involve competition. The seminal study by Scruton [59] indicated sport participation is often seen as incongruent with feminine identity. Recent research has shown a tendency for young girls to disengage from maintaining physical activity [60-63]. Therefore, the current study also aims to examine gender differences in character strengths and sport participation in adolescents in the UK.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Participants

A total of 3810 (1878 males, 1932 females) volunteer students (Age $M=14.3$, $SD=0.52$; R:13-16

years) from 33 secondary schools across the four nations of the UK participated in the study. These data were collected as part of the broader Character Education in UK Schools project [57, 64]. The study included different types of schools, such as state

Table 2: Demographic Descriptive Statistic of Participants

Variables Participants' Profile		Mean \pm SD or %
Age (year)	Adolescents	14.30 \pm 0.52
Gender	Male	49.3
	Female	50.7
Ethnicity	White British/Irish, or other White	85.8
	British Asian (Indian/Pakistani/Bangladeshi)	5.0
	'Mixed'	2.0
	Chinese, or other Asian	1.9
	Black Caribbean, African, or other Black	1.1
	Other/don't know/rather not say	4.2
Religion	Christian	34.2
	Atheists/non-believers	33.5
	Muslim	3.0
	Hindu	1.9
	Jewish	1.7
	Sikh	1.1
	Buddhist	0.5
	Other/don't know/rather not say	24.1
Character Strength	Appreciation of Beauty & Excellence	3.28 \pm 1.00
	Bravery	3.56 \pm 0.83
	Creativity	3.45 \pm 0.95
	Curiosity	3.54 \pm 0.88
	Fairness	3.38 \pm 0.84
	Forgiveness	3.54 \pm 0.97
	Gratitude	3.93 \pm 0.77
	Honesty	3.22 \pm 0.81
	Hope	3.37 \pm 0.92
	Humility	3.43 \pm 0.81
	Humor	3.80 \pm 0.95
	Judgement	3.27 \pm 0.91
	Kindness	3.64 \pm 0.82
	Leadership	3.00 \pm 1.01
	Love	3.56 \pm 0.91
	Love of Learning	3.05 \pm 0.98
	Perseverance	3.31 \pm 0.96
	Perspective	3.32 \pm 0.81
	Prudence	3.17 \pm 0.90
	Self-Regulation	3.00 \pm 0.95
	Social Intelligence	3.65 \pm 0.76
	Spirituality	2.33 \pm 1.09
	Teamwork	3.70 \pm 0.80
	Zest	3.59 \pm 0.93

Note. $N=3810$, SD =Standard Deviation.

(comprehensive), grammar, and independent (covering selective and non-selective); faith-based schools; single-sex and co-educational; rural and urban locations; those in affluent and deprived areas across UK. Most of the participants were White (See Table 2 for details). In addition to demographic questions, students were asked about their extra-curricular activities including participation in sports. Sport was not further defined and therefore refers to all sports likely to be undertaken by students in the UK school system, such as football (*i.e.*, soccer), netball, rugby, etc. It is also possible that some students may have included more unusual sports, such as Judo, in their decision to check the sport box.

Procedure

Before conducting the study, the University's Research Ethics Committee approved it, and informed consent was obtained from both students and their parents. The VIA Youth Survey (consisting of 96 items) was administered to students online or on paper, depending on the availability of computer facilities at their schools. Audio-delivered surveys were offered to students with special needs. Participants completed the surveys in a quiet place under the supervision of teachers or researchers and had an opportunity to ask questions for clarification only. Information regarding students' participation or nonparticipation in extracurricular activities, such as sports, was collected in the demographic information part of the VIA-Youth.

Assessments

Values in Action (VIA) Youth Survey (96-item). The VIA-96 is a shortened version of the VIA-Youth. The items of the self-report questionnaire identify behaviors, attitudes, and self-perceptions that are thought to be indicative of character strength. The original VIA-Youth had 198 items, but later research by the assessment's creators resulted in a shortened version that only included the four most closely linked questions for each character strength. This abbreviated version contains 96 items that can be thematically categorized into the 24-character strengths and six overarching virtues indicated in Table 1 and are assessed on a 5-point Likert scale from "very much like me" to "very much unlike me" (VIA-Youth) [5]. The VIA-Youth has been reported to have strong reliability (alpha coefficient ranging from .75 to .95 for the 24 character strengths) and construct validity showing small to moderate correlations with related dimensions, such as life satisfaction [15]. The current study used the short version of the questionnaire.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using the SPSS 26.0 program. First, a descriptive analysis was conducted which involved calculating means and standard deviations (See Table 2). Then, to investigate whether character strengths influenced students' participation in sports, a logistic regression analysis was performed, using 24 'character strengths' as predictors. To understand if gender differs in character strengths and sport participation, independent sample t-tests were also used.

RESULTS

To investigate the extent to which, if at all, the character strengths predict students' participation in sports, a binary logistic regression analysis was conducted. The forward selection method was employed to determine the best model, beginning with an empty model and adding the most significant term for each step. This method helped to obtain a reduced model. It resulted in 10 predictors (*i.e.*, appreciation of beauty & excellence, prudence, teamwork, kindness, humility, spirituality, creativity, perseverance, leadership, and zest), which as a set reliably distinguished between participation in sports or not. A test of the full model against a constant only model was statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 340.902$, $p < .001$ with $df = 10$). Nagelkerke's R^2 indicated approximately 13.6% of the variance in participation was accounted for by the predictors overall and Snell's R^2 was .099. Prediction success overall was 64.5%. The Wald criterion demonstrated that all predictors made a significant contribution to prediction ($p < .05$ for appreciation of beauty & excellence, prudence, teamwork, kindness, humility, and spirituality and $p < .001$ for creativity, perseverance, leadership, and zest). For instance, when teamwork character strength is raised by one unit, the odds ratio is 2.22 times as high, and therefore students who have high teamwork character strength are more likely to participate in sports (see Exp(B) value, Table 3). Similarly, students who have high perseverance, leadership, spirit, and zest tend to participate in sports. On the other hand, when appreciation of beauty & excellence character strength is raised by one unit, the odds ratio is 1.46 times as low, and therefore students who have high appreciation of beauty & excellence character strength are less likely to participate in sports. Similarly, students who have high prudence, creativity, kindness, and humility are less likely to participate in sports (See Exp (B) Table 3).

Table 3: Logit Regression Results for Predicting Students' Participation in Sports

Variables	β	S.E.	Wald	p	Exp(B)
Appreciation of Beauty & Excellence	-.146	.049	8.795	.003	.864
Prudence	-.119	.054	4.977	.026	.887
Teamwork	.222	.069	10.294	.001	1.248
Creativity	-.291	.053	30.604	.000	.748
Perseverance	.214	.057	14.335	.000	1.239
Kindness	-.178	.063	8.028	.005	.837
Leadership	.264	.048	29.939	.000	1.302
Humility	-.161	.054	8.994	.003	.851
Spirit	.096	.039	6.057	.014	1.101
Zest	.481	.051	89.860	.000	1.617
Constant	-.563	.239	5.569	.018	.569

We also examined gender differences in terms of character strengths that predict students' participation/nonparticipation in sports (e.g., appreciation of beauty & excellence, prudence, teamwork, kindness, humility, spirituality, creativity, perseverance, leadership, and zest). Independent sample t-tests revealed a significant difference favoring female students in the scores of prudence, perseverance, kindness, and humility, while male students were favored over female students in creativity, spirituality, and zest. The corrected alpha value was $p < .005$ (See Table 4). Results also indicated that 73.5% of male students participated in sports compared to 54.4% for female students.

DISCUSSION

The current study contributes to our understanding of how character strengths play role in sports

participation and nonparticipation in adolescence. The results indicate that adolescents with a high "justice" core value, such as teamwork and leadership and a high "courage" core value, such as perseverance and zest tend to participate in sports. It can be interpreted that students preferred to engage in sports if they had civic strengths emphasizing healthy community life and strengths needing will to achieve goals. However, those with high "wisdom" core values, such as creativity, high "temperance" core value, such as prudence and high "humanity" core value, such as kindness tend not to participate in sports. Therefore, adolescents with cognitive strengths that require acquisition and use of information, interpersonal strengths that require befriending others, and strengths that protect against excess did not prefer to participate in sports. On the other hand, the "transcendence" core value, which involves creating connections to the larger universe, did not show a significant difference between

Table 4: Independent T-test Results for Gender Differences in Character Strengths

Variables	Female (Mean \pm SD)	Male (Mean \pm SD)	t	p
Appreciation of Beauty & Excellence	3.46 \pm 0.99	3.09 \pm 0.97	-10.85	.200
Prudence	3.20 \pm 0.92	3.15 \pm 0.87	-.946	.005
Teamwork	3.72 \pm 0.80	3.67 \pm 0.80	-1.79	.653
Creativity	3.42 \pm 0.98	3.48 \pm 0.92	1.79	.002
Perseverance	3.33 \pm 1.00	3.30 \pm 0.91	-.858	<.001
Kindness	3.83 \pm 0.75	3.43 \pm 0.83	-14.275	<.001
Leadership	2.92 \pm 1.02	3.08 \pm 0.99	4.62	.247
Humility	3.53 \pm 0.82	3.32 \pm 0.78	-7.549	.016
Spirituality	2.30 \pm 1.07	2.37 \pm 1.11	1.863	.001
Zest	3.54 \pm 0.98	3.67 \pm 0.88	3.690	<.001

Note. N=3810, SD=Standard Deviation.

participating or non-participating in sports. Positive characters might be gained in sport and physical activity settings [65] where there are opportunities for individuals to learn discipline, strategies, respect, sportsmanship, and commitment [66]. However, these opportunities may not affect character development in a positive way if winning is being emphasized over other considerations [67]. A winning emphasis might cause coaches and athletes to behave inappropriately, such as being aggressive, cheating, or taking performance enhancing drugs [28]. So, although sports may be significant for developing character, the starting point for individuals as they engage in sport for the first time seems important for understanding how character strengths will develop in a positive or negative way as the individual engages in sport settings. Individuals inevitably bring to sport various blends and magnitudes of character strengths that emerge longitudinally in and outside of sport to affect skill development and further shape various clusters of character strengths. For instance, an athlete may have the character strengths of perseverance but lack the learned behaviors linked to effective communication and time management. Some common reasons for students to participate in sport are to belong to a group, have achievement, improve skills, have fun and fitness, gain recognition, and find excitement [27]. The reasons to drop out of sport include too much pressure, lack of success or support, boredom, injury, and friends leaving [27, 68]. Longitudinal research is needed to understand which character strengths play a role in maintaining sport participation and amount of time spent in sports. Understanding which strengths are energizing to the individual from the findings of the present study, as well as those potentially energizing learned behaviors, is critical for promoting a process of healing, renewal, and continuous strengths-use [69].

In the present study, gender differences were found for seven out of 10 character strengths that predict students' participation/nonparticipation in sports, with females scoring higher in prudence, perseverance, kindness, and humility compared to males, and males scoring higher in creativity, spirituality, and zest compared to females. Females and males value morality and moral emotions to varying degrees depending on their gender roles and socialization [70]. Females are expected to be caring and warm, to value morality and kindness as integral features of being female, and to experience unpleasant emotions when others harm the community's welfare. These attitudes might partially explain girls' higher scores if VIA-character strengths may be considered morally valued

descriptors, including being careful about one's choices, not saying or doing things that might later be regretted (e.g., prudence), doing favors and good deeds for others (e.g., kindness), and letting one's accomplishments speak for themselves (e.g., humility). The fact that females were more prone to express positive interpersonal emotions aligns with other findings [52, 71]. Gender differences may be related to the biosocial interaction of females and males who may also be biologically prone to perform certain roles [72]. Results also showed that female adolescents tend to participate in sport less than male adolescents in UK, which is consistent with recent gender and sport participation studies conducted in different populations [60-63].

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Including the data of a large number of adolescents from diverse backgrounds, the current study contributes to the understanding of predictors of sport participation in terms of character strengths. However, there are some limitations to the study. First, self-report measures might not be completely accurate because of personal bias. Thus, multiple sources of data may be necessary in addition to using qualitative methods, such as focus groups. Second, the study is cross-sectional. Longitudinal research is necessary to examine how the character strengths an individual possesses before participating in sports develops, weakens, or changes after sports participation. Finally, the present study did not focus on the type of sports that adolescents experience. Future studies might consider investigating how predictors of character strengths differ based on the type of physical activity participation, such as tennis, swimming, and basketball.

IMPLICATIONS

The present study highlights that pre-existing character strengths play role in the sports participation of adolescents. Programs and policies promoting sport participation should consider the character strengths of adolescents. Learning which characters an adolescent possesses before or during engaging in sports or physical activities might allow parents, teachers, and coaches to provide effective feedback to enhance adolescents' training and help them to internalize such behaviors over time. Using these strengths in the context of sports and physical activities might catalyze skill development, and this strengths-focus both energizes and buffers against negative psychological influences [69].

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