

## **Gender Differences in Character Strengths, Social Competence, and Peer Relations Among Pakistani and Russian University Students**

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The present study attempted to examine the comparative gender differences in relation to character strengths, social competence, and peer relations among 558 university students of Pakistan and Russia including both men and women (age range = 20-29 years). Appraisal protocols of Brief Strength Test (Peterson, 2004), Social Competence Scale (Shahzad, 2001), and Index of Peer Relations (Hudson, 1996) were employed to assess major constructs of the study. Results showed that character strengths and social competence positively predicted peer relations in Pakistani and Russian samples. Findings also proposed that gender significantly moderates the relationship between character strengths and peer relations. Findings further indicated that overall women displayed more character strengths as compared to men across both samples. In addition, Pakistani women displayed better social competence as compared to men; whereas nonsignificant gender differences were found in Russian sample. On the contrary, Pakistani and Russian men displayed better peer relations as compared to women. Cross-cultural comparison revealed that Russian students were higher on the strengths of justice, temperance, and transcendence as well as social competence as compared to Pakistani students; conversely nonsignificant cultural differences were found on the strengths of wisdom, courage, and humanity. Similarly, there were nonsignificant cultural differences on peer relations.

*Keywords:* Character strengths, social competence, peer relations, university students

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Generally, character strengths are characterized by two defining features; firstly, these are relatively stable and enduring personality attributes that could be manifested through cognitive, emotional and behavioral domains; secondly, these strengths bear moral values which are beneficial to oneself as well as to others. According to Peterson and Seligman (2004), character strengths are considered as the rudimentary essential components which play a pivotal role in developing the goodness, thriving, and flourishing characteristics of the humankind. These postulates are originally hypothesized by Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) based on the principles of positive psychology, emphasizing that happiness, experiences of flow, and other flourishing tendencies are enabled by good character that enhances psychological, social and emotional adjustment (Park & Peterson, 2009; Peterson & Seligman, 2004); as well as cognitive and interpersonal skills (Louis, 2011).

Peterson and Seligman (2006) listed broader six virtues of wisdom, temperance, courage, justice, humanity, and transcendence in the classification system of values in action bearing distinctive features but also share the similarity that they all engage the core virtue. Overall, experts all around the world (Park & Peterson, 2009; Ruch et al. 2010; Shryack, Steger, Krueger, & Kallie, 2010; Singh & Choubisa, 2010) consented on the classification of twenty-four universal character strengths broadly placed in six categories of virtues including wisdom (including strengths of imagination, curiosity, open-mindedness, love of learning, and perspective); courage (including strengths of bravery, persistence, integrity, and vitality); humanity (including strengths of love, kindness, and social intelligence); justice (including strengths of citizenship, fairness, and leadership strengths); temperance (including strengths of forgiveness, modesty, prudence, and self-regulation); and transcendence (including strengths of appreciation of beauty, gratitude, hope, humour, and spirituality).

According to Park and Peterson (2009), character strengths contribute to the variety of completions that ensure the good life for the person's ownself and for others; and also enable the person to manage hardships in life. This supports the idea that character strengths lead to the desirable outcomes like social adjustment and competence that help an individual to adjust to the environment successfully. The current study also caters the predictive association between character strengths and social competence. Social competence is the ability to understand and manage people and to behave genuinely and prudently in human interactions (Law, Wong, & Song, 2004). Orpinas (2010) declared that social competence is a

multifaceted and multidimensional construct which encompass diverse set of motivational and anticipation skills that are essentially required for social adaptation.

Another construct that has been taken into account in the present study is peer relations which form an important developmental context (Cillessen & Bellmore, 2011). Peers are the unified group with whom young people recognize, learn, fight, find new endeavours, and look into themselves (Rubin, 2009). Peer connections are progressively essential different stages of life span. Encountering positive peer connections help positive mental self-portrait, social ability and scholastic accomplishment, in addition to different conclusions, and may go about as a support against the negative effect of family inconveniences (McGrath & Noble, 2010). Youngsters who think that it hard to create such connections are more prone to be forceful, dejected, and discouraged (Yu, Tepper, & Russell, 2009). Furthermore, peers regularly give much required social and emotional assistance and serve as socialization executors that support to form one's practices and convictions. Peers are the people who are about the same age or development level, reasonably close companions, and having the same exercises (Santrock, 2008). Healthy peer affiliation has been associated with perceived self-worth, high level of perspective taking, and prosocial behavior (Cillessen & Bellmore, 2011).

Several empirical explorations provide supportive evidences for the relationship of character strengths with social competence. For instance, a study found that interpersonal strengths predicted social functioning among adolescents (Baron, 2000; Shoshani & Slone, 2012). Findings also declared that strengths of humanity which include social strengths are positively correlated with interaction in academic settings whereas psychological well-being is in linear relationship with the strengths of temperance, justice, wisdom and transcendence (Ruch et al., 2010). Similarly, Orpinas (2010) asserted that character strengths facilitate the acquisition of life goals which ultimately lead to higher need satisfaction (such as needs for independence, relationship and well-being). Similarly, character strengths also positively reinforce the social skills in various domains of life; thus leading to greater goal progress in life (Biswas-Diener, Gillett, Linley, & Nielsen, 2010).

Later explorations (Madden, Green, & Grant, 2011) inferred that students who have provided with coaching programs to enhance their character strengths displayed significant increase in reporting experiences of flow, engagement, optimism, and life satisfaction. Another study also inferred that students who are high on strengths of

justice, temperance, and transcendence have been more inclined to count their blessings and expressed more optimistic attributions towards general life events and overall life satisfaction, better emotional health and less negative affect (Froh, Sefick, & Emmons, 2008).

Empirical evidences have also highlighted differences on the major constructs of the study along gender. For instance, Toner, Haslam, Robinson, and Williams (2012) asserted that women reflected better strengths of humanity, transcendence, wisdom, and justice. Similarly, Hool (2011) reported that women scored higher on all the character strengths as compared to men. Shimai, Otake, Park, Peterson, and Seligman (2006) inferred on the basis of cross-cultural comparison of American and Japanese young adults that some character strengths are similar in distribution among these cultures such as strengths of kindness, humour, and love; while these samples are also similar in displaying lower tendencies of prudence, modesty, and self-regulation. Brissette, Carver, and Scheier (2002) further inferred that male university students reflected better efficacy, optimism, social competence, and decreased mental distress in comparison to women. However, few indigenous studies (Azam, 2006; Shahzad, 2001) found non-significant gender differences in relation to social competence.

Additional evidences revealed significant differences across cultures on character strengths revealing a consistent, robust relationship to life satisfaction among Europeans (Ruch et al., 2010), Japanese (Shimai et al., 2006) and Croatians (Brdar & Kashdan, 2010). As compared to Americans, youth from the East Asians are higher on the character strengths of hope, teamwork, and zest; while adults are higher on appreciation of beauty and excellence, honesty, leadership, and open-mindedness (Park & Peterson, 2006). Drummond and Quah (2001) found that Caucasians are low on the expression of anger and hostility and expressed more strength of humanity, wisdom, and transcendence as compared to Chinese. A considerable insight has been offered by Park et al. (2006) in their exploration of character strengths among 54 nations concluded that overall individualistic cultures are high on the strengths of gratitude, temperance, forgiveness, humanity, honesty, teamwork, and fairness; while collectivistic societies reflected more strengths of prudence, kindness, wisdom, and modesty.

In relation to social competence, cultural influences are optimally explained by Rubin, Bukowski, and Laursen (2011), pointed out that as larger portion of the world are the inhabitants of Eastern countries; therefore, cross-cultural explorations on social competence must be

interpreted with caution in sense that these skills are majorly culturally embedded and may take various expressions in their manifestations across cultural settings. On similar lines, Schneider, Woodburn, Toro, and Udvari (2005) also noted that within any culture, our behaviors are primarily shaped by the culturally determined and regulated customs, socialization practices, as well as based belief systems. Conclusively, it is much safer to declare that the psychological meaning attributed to any given social behaviour is, predominantly, a reflection of the ecological function of the social context in which it is produced (Rubin et al., 2011). On similar note, Ivtzan, Niemiec, and Briscoe (2016) asserted that manifestation of character strengths and social competence are not only culturally developed but also appreciated differentially in various cultures. McGrath (2015) considered integrating psychological and cultural perspectives on virtues found that hierarchical structure of character strengths is majorly shaped by the cultural values and beliefs.

Character strengths is vital for developing personality of young adults and may facilitate to enhance other positive attributes like social competence and social skills (Leontopoulou & Triliva, 2012; Madden et al., 2011). It is beneficial to identify the strengths that are responsible for the development of these constructs thereby, helping students to work to enhance their required strengths which help them to establish and sustain social relationships with their peers. It is equally imperative to explore the construct of peer relations among university students as they are in the elementary stage of handling pragmatic encounters of personal and work life; hence, their character strengths would likely to enable them in meeting both inner and external challenges.

Given that cultures vary in their customs and beliefs, the same behaviour may be interpreted differently across cultures. It is likely that any behaviour that is viewed, within a culture, as adaptive will lead to its encouragement by significant others including parents and peers; in contrast, if a behaviour is perceived to be maladaptive, it will be discouraged (Yu et al., 2009). Moreover, the means by which the given behaviour is encouraged or discouraged may be culturally determined and defined. Broadly, researchers (Brdar & Kashdan, 2010; Niemiec, 2013; Shimai et al., 2006), typically discuss two cultural phenomena, that is independent, individualistic, or Western cultures, and interdependent, collectivistic, or Eastern and Southern (e.g., Central and South American) cultures. Western cultures are often described as those for whom members value assertiveness, expressiveness, and competitiveness; whereas Eastern and Southern cultures are often described as those for whom members value group

harmony and cooperation (Chen & Tse, 2008; Niemiec, Shogren, & Wehmeyer, 2017). However, there is a substantial consensus that most countries of the world present a fine blend of both individualistic and collectivistic characteristics with an enhanced flavor of either being individualism or collectivism (French, Lee, & Pidada, 2006). Most of the cited literature presented a comparison between Western and Eastern cultures and relatively little known of Asian cultures; more specifically Russian society which is predominantly considered as an individualistic culture; whereas Pakistani society is majorly reflective of collectivism; therefore, the present study primarily focus on the cross cultural comparison of Pakistani and Russian university students.

Major objectives of the study were to determine the predictive role of character strengths and social competence in peer relation among university students of Pakistan and Russia. It was also intended to establish the moderating role of gender in the relationship between character strengths and positive peer relations. In addition, cultural and gender differences were also explored in relation to the major constructs of the study across both groups of samples.

Review of the relevant literature provides the basis for the formulation of the following hypotheses:

1. Character strengths is positive predictor of social competence and peer relations among university students.
2. Social competence is positive predictor of peer relations among university students.
3. Gender moderates the relationship between character strengths and peer relations among university students.
4. Russian students are inclined to express more character strengths, social competence, and peer relations as compared to their Pakistani counterparts.
5. Women students are likely to reflect more character strengths and social competence as compared to men students; while men students would express better peer relations than women students.

## **Method**

### **Sample**

A convenient sample ( $N = 558$ ) comprising Pakistani ( $n = 310$ ) and Russian ( $n = 248$ ) public and private sector university students, including both men ( $n = 255$ ) and women ( $n = 303$ ) was acquired. Age

range of the respondents varied from 20-29 years ( $M = 26.11$ ,  $SD = 3.37$ ). Respondents were enrolled students of Masters Program from the different faculties of engineering, biological sciences, administrative sciences, and social sciences. The Pakistani sample was acquired from Quaid-i-Azam University ( $n = 115$ ), National University of Science and Technology ( $n = 90$ ), and COMSATS ( $n = 105$ ); while, Russian sample was obtained from Saint-Petersburg State University of Architecture and Civil Engineering of Russia ( $n = 248$ ). Inclusion criteria was based on acquiring respondents who were full time regular students with minimal 14 years of formal education; while those students were not included who were married or had children. Demographic information of the sample was acquired through demographic sheet attached with questionnaire booklet.

### Instruments

Following instruments were used in the present study:

**Brief Strength Test (BST; Peterson & Seligman, 2004).** The BST (Peterson & Seligman, 2004) consisted of 24 positively phrased statements that could be responded on a 5-point Likert scale with response options ranging from *Never* (1) to *Always* (5). On the whole, scores could vary from minimum 24 to maximum 125 and high score indicate more presence of character strengths. According to Peterson and Seligman (2004), BST consisted of six subscales (derived from the broader categories of virtues) comprising of Wisdom (5 items;  $\alpha = .70$ ), Courage (4 items;  $\alpha = .72$ ), Humanity (3 items;  $\alpha = .71$ ), Justice (3 items;  $\alpha = .71$ ), Temperance (4 items;  $\alpha = .70$ ), and Transcendence (5 items;  $\alpha = .73$ ). In the present study, Cronbach's alpha of .82 was acquired for the total BST; while, for subscales, it ranged from .71-.79.

**Social Competence Scale (SCS; Shahzad, 2001).** The SCS was employed to assess the social competencies of the young adults. Broadly, social competencies comprised of emotional, behavioral, and cognitive skills which would be essential for the social adjustment and adaptation in the various domains of life. It consisted of 22 items with five negatively scored items and to be responded on 5-point rating scale ranging from *Strongly agree* (5) to *Strongly disagree* (1). Possible score range on Social Competence Scale was 22 - 110 with high scores indicating better ability of social competencies. The Cronbach's alpha of the scale reported by author was .72 (Shahzad,

2001); whereas Cronbach's alpha of .73 was achieved on the present sample.

**Index of Peer Relations (Hudson, 1996).** Index of Peer Relations was employed to assess the extent of having better peer relations. It consisted of 25 statements with 11 negatively scored items to be responded on 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1(*None of the time*) to 5 (*All of the time*). Minimum score that could be attained on this scale was 25; while maximum score could be 125 with higher scores reflecting better peer relations. Reliability of the original scale was .91 (Hudson, 1996); whereas alpha coefficient of .82 was achieved in the present study.

### **Procedure**

Initially formal permissions were acquired from the administrative officials of the universities. Respondents were approached individually and their informed consent was acquired. Participants were briefed about the purpose of the study and were also assured about the confidentiality of any personal information shared with the researchers. Afterwards, questionnaire booklet was administered on individual basis. Questionnaire booklet comprised of covering letter, informed consent form, demographic sheet, and questionnaires. Written as well as verbal instructions were given so as to maximize optimum completion of the questionnaires. Later, participants were graciously thanked for the provision of valuable information. Average completion time for questionnaire booklet was recorded as 15 minutes.

Total 600 booklets were distributed and only 558 were made part of final study after data cleaning and excluding incomplete and random responses booklets.

### **Results**

Bivariate and multivariate analyses were conducted to determine the proposed relationships among the major constructs of the study. In addition multiple regression analysis was performed to establish the moderating role of gender in predicting peer relations among Pakistani and Russian students.



Table 1

*Regression Analysis for Variables Predicting Peer Relations among University Students (N = 558)*

Predictors	Pakistani Students (n = 310)			Russian Students (n = 248)		
	B	SE	$\beta$	B	SE	B
Constant	68.51	3.56		77.29	2.16	
Social Comp.	.58	.15	.22*	.64	.19	.36**
$R^2 = .10$ $\Delta R^2 = .08$ $F = 13.74^{**}$ $R^2 = .16$ $\Delta R^2 = .14$ $F = 19.38^{***}$						
Constant	46.81	5.00		55.84	4.11	
Social Comp.	.41	.15	.16*	.37	.11	.22*
Dimensions of Character Strengths						
Wisdom	.50	.22	.23*	.55	.11	.27*
Courage	.62	.24	.27*	.84	.15	.31**
Humanity	.83	.28	.29*	.83	.20	.23*
Justice	.61	.30	.24*	1.21	.29	.36**
Temperance	.78	.22	.28*	.72	.14	.28**
Transcendence	.65	.21	.22*	.65	.17	.25*
$R^2 = .19$ $\Delta R^2 = .15$ $F = 9.23^{**}$ $R^2 = .25$ $\Delta R^2 = .23$ $F = 21.67^{***}$						

Note. Comp. = competence.

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

Table 1 represents the predictive role of character strengths and social competence for peer relations among Pakistani and Russian students. For Pakistani students, results show that 8% variance in peer relations is explained by social competence; whereas overall character strengths explained 15% variance in peer relations. Variance explained by these constructs is in positive direction; hence, it can be inferred that higher presence of character strengths and social competence would increase peer relations; thereby, offering empirical support for H1 and H2 for the sample of Pakistani students.

On the contrary, for Russian students, results showed that social competence explained 14% variance in predicting peer relations; while all components of character strengths are significant positive predictors of peer relations. Overall model explains 23% variance by character strengths and social competence in predicting peer relations; hence providing substantial support for H1 and H2.

Table 2

*Multiple Regression Analysis for Gender as a Moderator in Predicting Peer Relations (N = 558)*

Predictors	Peer Relations			95% CI	
	Model 1B	Model 2B	Model 3B	LL	UL
Constant	77.21**	86.34**	99.82**	88.45	113.19
Age (in years)	.11	.16	.19	1.70	2.88
Education (in years)	.06	.13	.15	1.69	5.65
Character Strengths		.37**	.28**	0.07	0.48
Gender		.62**	.74**	0.88	1.54
Character Strengths X Gender			.07**	0.03	0.11
$R^2$	.03	.19	.22		
$\Delta R^2$		.16	.05		
$F$	13.28**	29.33**	20.05**		
$\Delta F$		35.61	4.49		

Note. CI = confidence interval; LL = lower limit; UL = upper limit; Age and education are entered as control variables.

Table 2 demonstrates the moderating role of gender in explaining the relationship between character strengths and peer relations. As presented in Table 2, after controlling age and education, gender appeared to moderate the effect of character strengths on peer relations and added 5% additional variance in the model. The slope value of 5.20 ( $t = 3.56, p < .01$ ) indicated that though, women are high on character strengths, but men students are better in establishing their peer relations. These findings stood valid for both Pakistani and Russian samples; hence offering empirical support for H3.

Table 3

*Cultural Differences on Character Strengths, Social Competence, and Peer Relations (N = 558)*

Variables	Pakistani (n = 310)		Russian (n = 248)		$t(556)$	$p$	95% CI		Cohen's $D$
	$M$	$SD$	$M$	$SD$			LL	UL	
Wisdom	19.20	8.01	18.11	9.25	1.10	.53	-1.44	1.22	.08
Courage	15.37	6.54	15.82	8.28	0.54	.48	-0.11	0.23	.01
Humanity	14.33	7.94	15.00	9.21	0.89	.95	-0.04	0.68	.11
Justice	14.55	6.24	16.77	7.01	4.37	.00	1.13	3.44	.44
Temperance	12.79	6.53	14.56	7.36	4.66	.00	1.09	3.36	.47
Transcendence	13.61	8.88	15.74	6.27	3.49	.01	0.66	1.24	.36
Social Comp.	83.24	17.23	87.01	19.62	5.22	.00	1.03	7.29	.63
Peer Relations	24.71	9.00	25.03	11.54	1.52	.38	-1.42	1.41	.10

Note. CI = confidence interval; LL = lower limit; UL = upper limit; Comp. = Competence.

Table 3 indicated cultural differences across Pakistani and Russian samples in relation to dimensions of character strengths, social competence, and peer relations. Results indicated that strengths of temperance, justice, and transcendence are higher in Russian students as compared to the Pakistani youth; while nonsignificant cultural differences are observed on the dimensions of wisdom, courage, and humanity. In addition, Russian students displayed better social competence as compared to their Pakistani counterparts; however, nonsignificant cultural differences existed on peer relations. Therefore, H4 is partially supported in the context of present findings.

Table 4

*Gender Differences on Character Strengths, Social Competence, and Peer Relations (N=558)*

	Women	Men			CI 95%		Cohen's
	<i>M(SD)</i>	<i>M(SD)</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>LL</i>	<i>UL</i>	<i>d</i>
Pakistani Students							
Wisdom	19.42 (2.68)	17.53(2.99)	3.70	.01	0.44	4.54	.46
Courage	14.61(2.37)	14.16(2.61)	1.04	.12	-0.12	1.01	.18
Humanity	14.03(2.96)	11.35(3.18)	3.68	.00	0.17	3.12	.49
Justice	15.56(4.82)	11.98(2.17)	4.54	.00	2.13	5.05	.53
Temperance	16.82(2.42)	14.17 2.47	3.30	.01	1.09	4.21	.42
Transcendence	20.58(2.70)	18.65 3.10	2.75	.02	1.26	3.59	.38
Social Comp.	80.51(8.15)	75.50 9.20	5.01	.00	1.06	4.72	.64
Peer Relations	22.77(3.19)	27.40 3.54	4.91	.01	1.42	6.15	.51
Russian Students							
Wisdom	22.09 5.62	19.53 7.33	4.62	.00	1.44	5.38	.53
Courage	15.55 4.03	14.20 5.00	1.54	.48	-.02	1.23	.11
Humanity	15.29 5.08	10.41 5.66	6.05	.00	1.04	5.22	.68
Justice	16.62 3.81	11.98 2.18	5.81	.00	1.13	6.05	.59
Temperance	14.82 4.55	11.22 2.47	4.66	.00	1.06	4.29	.56
Transcendence	19.58 2.70	15.65 4.68	5.77	.00	1.66	4.24	.52
Social Comp.	77.66 11.02	78.01 2.33	1.01	.98	-2.06	1.37	.16
Peer Relations	28.11 5.62	30.23 6.01	3.87	.01	1.42	4.44	.39

Note. CI = confidence interval; LL = lower limit; UL = upper limit; Comp. = Competence.

Table 4 shows differences among Pakistani and Russian men and women on study variables. Results showed significant, yet, similar pattern of gender differences on the dimensions of character strengths across both Pakistani and Russian students. It has been found that Pakistani and Russian women reflected higher strengths of humanity, temperance, wisdom, transcendence, and justice as compared to men; while nonsignificant gender differences are observed on the dimension of courage.

Furthermore, Pakistani women exhibited higher social competence in relation to men; while non-significant gender differences are found among Russian students on the same construct. Finally, similar trend is revealed on the construct of peer relations where Pakistani and Russian men exhibited better peer relations as compared to women. The aforementioned findings presented in Table 4 offered partial support for H5.

## Discussion

The present study attempted to explore the cultural differences across gender in relation to character strengths, social competence, and peer relations among Pakistani and Russian university students. The study also determined the moderating role of gender in explaining the relationship between character strengths and peer relations. Cross cultural comparison was further established among Pakistani and Russian students. Psychometric estimates of the measures used depicted the credibility and dependability of the instruments to gauge the said constructs.

Findings of the study showed that character strengths (constituting wisdom, humanity, temperance, transcendence, and justice) positively predicted peer relations across Pakistani and Russian students; however, character strength of courage does not found to be a significant predictor of peer relations among both samples. These results found substantial support from the earlier set of studies. For instance, Shoshani and Slone (2012) found that interpersonal strengths predicted social functioning among adolescents and declared that strengths of humanity which include social strengths are positively associated with social interactions, whereas strengths of temperance and transcendence are positively associated with healthier peer relationships. Similarly, a handful evidences indicated that implementation of character strengths in daily life have a direct role in providing support to achieve both short and long term goals which in turn, may lead to higher subjective well-being and need satisfaction (Biswas-Diener et al., 2010; Ivtzan, Niemiec, & Briscoe, 2016). Leontopoulou and Triliva (2012) inferred that character strengths enhance psychological, social, and emotional adjustment by fostering cognitive and interpersonal skills.

Results further showed that social competence is positive predictor of peer relations among Pakistani and Russian university students. The inference for this finding can be drawn from prior empirical evidences which have shown that the ability to understand

and manage social relations and to act wisely in human relations is strongly associated with peer acceptance and positive peer relationships (Law et al., 2004; McGrath, 2014). According to Baron (2000), social competence as a capability of an adolescent to deal with social situations in an effective manner is linked in linear direction with peer popularity and peer acceptance. Robert (2004) and Niemiec et al. (2017) also asserted that people who are socially competent are more likely to be capable of being aware of their social surroundings and better equipped with social skills. These competencies help them to be better oriented and sensitive towards the needs of others; and show more readiness to cooperate with others and resolve conflicts. This, in turn, helps them to develop and sustain healthier and progressive relations with people (in general) and friends and peers (in particular). In addition, McGrath (2015) found that maintaining peer relations is greatly influenced by the cultural expressions of interpersonal relationships; where individual social competencies play major role in individualistic societies as compared to the collectivistic countries (where social roles are more preferred).

In the current study, moderating role of gender is explored and results showed that gender moderates the relationship between character strengths and peer relations and this model stood valid across both cultural samples. These findings can be optimally explained in the backdrop of relational cultural theory of female development (Miller, 1988 as cited in Jordan, Walker, & Hartling, 2004). This model asserted that social relationships are the central organizing feature in girls' development. For girls, the personal and individual strengths play an important role in the growth-fostering relationships, that is, connection; while the impact of disconnection is an inevitable part of being in relationship (caused by empathic failures and relational violations). Girls who feel less emotionally safe reported fewer friends and are slower to trust peers; conversely, boys utilize their personal strengths in making compromised connections especially with their peers (Walker & Rosen, 2004). Similarly, Madden et al. (2011) asserted that relationship between personal traits (such as emotional intelligence, stability, and confidence) and social relationships is differentially existed among men and women. Biswas-Diener et al. (2011) further added that women are more prone to perceive their peer and social relations in terms of emotional safety; while men usually center their relations on social equality and empowerment.

Cross cultural comparison revealed that overall Russian students displayed higher strengths of justice, temperance, and transcendence than Pakistani students; however, nonsignificant cultural differences

are found on the strengths of humanity, wisdom, and courage. Moreover, Russian students also displayed better social competence than their Pakistani counterparts; while non-significant difference is observed on peer relations across Pakistani and Russian students. A probable explanation for the aforementioned findings can be understood in the work of Orpinas (2010) asserting that societal norms and beliefs are majorly culturally determined patterns and shape our social behaviors; thereby offering multiple definitions and interpretations of the same behavior across various cultures. Moreover, societal practices of categorizing, stereotyping, and stratifying individuals have an enormous impact on peoples' sense of connection and disconnection (McGrath & Noble, 2010). Pakistani society as a collectivistic structure is more influenced by the societal values, norms, and beliefs; therefore, racism, sexism, and classism impede all individuals' ability to engage and participate in growth-fostering strengths of justice, temperance, and transcendence. On the other hand, Russian culture is a reflection of individualistic model; thereby promoting personal and individual identification in enhancing social competencies (Leontopoulou & Triliva, 2012; Park, 2004). In a cross cultural comparison based on American and Norwegian military officers, Hool (2011) observed a similar trend on the strengths of honesty, bravery, perseverance, and teamwork as compared to the civilian sample. Overall, the strengths of humanity, wisdom, and courage are deeply embedded in one's own social perception of the society and may be exercised on personal preference (Toner et al., 2012).

Gender differences across Pakistani and Russian students revealed few similarities as well as differences across both cultures. It has been found that Pakistani and Russian female students depicted higher character strengths as compared to male students; while better peer relations are exhibited by male Pakistani and Russian students as compared to their female counterparts. On the contrary, Pakistani female students expressed better social competence as compared to men; while non-significant gender difference is observed on the construct of social competence among Russian students. With reference to the construct of character strengths, this pattern of findings is supported by Niemiec (2013) declaring that women are more likely to be nurturing, compassionate, and possess virtues of kindness and humanity as compared to men. Similar assertion is also explained by Snyder and Lopez (2007) that virtues of humanity comprising social strengths (nurturing and being friendly with others), forgiveness, and prudence is more expressed by women; while men are higher on transcendence and strengths of appreciation of beauty,

gratitude, hope, humour, and spirituality. Toner et al. (2012) reported that women are higher at strengths of humanity, transcendence, wisdom, and justice. Similarly, Shimai, Otake, Park, Peterson, and Seligman (2006) found women are inclined to express more nurturance, kindness, and love; whereas men tend to display attributes of valor and innovation. Hool (2011) further added that overall women have a tendency to report more character strengths than men. Likewise, Park et al. (2006) asserted on the basis of data acquired from 54 nations that gender ideology is more reflective of the cultural expression functioning in the context of individualism and collectivism. In addition, Niemiec (2013) explained that gender differences in expression of character strengths are greatly shaped by the cultural values prevailing in individualistic and collectivistic societies. However, much recent evidence (Heintz, Kramm, & Ruch, 2017) derived from meta-analysis based on 74 nations declared that a random-effects model yielded significant gender differences for 17 of the 24 character strengths, although only four of these differences showed at least small effects, that is females scored higher than males in appreciation of beauty and excellence, kindness, love, and gratitude. Thus, males and females were mostly similar in their character strengths.

On the parameter of peer relations, a notable empirical work has shown that healthy peer affiliation with associated perceived self-worth, high level of perspective taking, and pro-social behaviour is more among the male college students (French et al., 2006). Likewise, men's demonstration in a socially legitimate manner is to make constructive relationship with companions; to the extent that young men act in a socially cumbersome or non-normative way in order to avoid peer rejection.

Coming to the gender differences on the construct of social competence, Biswas-Diener et al. (2011) and Orpinas (2010) asserted that men and women do not differ in their ability of interpersonal skills and social competencies. These studies supported our finding with reference to the Russian students; where no gender difference is found on social competence. However, with regard to Pakistani women, acquisition of social competencies is part of socialization practices which would be facilitative in the social and emotional adjustment in later years of their lives. Moreover, the cultural web of values and preferred practices also foster the need of social skills learning and societal proficiency, therefore, young Pakistani women have displayed more social competency than men.

### **Limitations and Suggestions**

The present study has certain potential drawbacks which may limit the generalizability of the findings. Firstly, the present study employed cross sectional design; thereby restricting the identification of causal relationships among the study variables. Secondly, only self-report measures were used to assess the perceptions of respondents which only help in looking at the phenomena on a surface level. However, employing qualitative measures such as unstructured interviews would facilitate in capturing the in-depth understanding of the present constructs. Thirdly, future endeavours may incorporate different segments of the population which not only enhances the inclusion of different age cohorts of the sample but also augment the generalizability of the findings. Last, but not the least, it would be appropriate to focus on the functions of cognitive skills and perceptual processes in the development of social competence and peer relations as the interplay of these factors would be assistive in determining the role of learning in shaping our behaviours.

### **Implications**

Findings of the study helped us to develop understanding about particular character strengths and social competence that would facilitate in fostering emotional and psychological adjustment by enhancing our social competence. Therefore, a major implication of the present study would provide guidelines to academic counselors and educationists in devising strength coaching programs to enhance character strengths and virtues among students. On similar lines, training modules of social skills can be imparted in order to escalate the social competencies comprising of interpersonal and problem solving skills of young adults. In addition, learning about one's character strengths would be assistive for the young individuals to live a happy and flourishing life. Finally, curriculum modifications in the domain of educational psychology would also facilitate in the acquisition of supportive virtues and social competencies that not only help the youth to develop positive and cooperative peer relations, nevertheless, also better psychosocial adjustment in the later years.

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