

# CHARACTER STRENGTHS AND WELL-BEING IN YOUNG ADULTS: ARE THERE GENDER DIFFERENCES?

<sup>1</sup>Shikha Bansal, <sup>2</sup>Sandeep Singh, <sup>3</sup>Taruna Gera

<sup>1</sup>Research Scholar, Applied Psychology, Guru Jambheshwar University of Science and Technology, Hisar, Haryana, India 125001. Mob: +91 9996424366, e-mail: 6246.shikha@gmail.com.

<sup>2</sup>Professor, Applied Psychology, Guru Jambheshwar University of Science and Technology, Hisar, Haryana, India 125001.

<sup>3</sup>Assistant Professor, Applied Psychology, Guru Jambheshwar University of Science and Technology, Hisar, Haryana, India 125001.

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## Abstract

Due to gender differences in the specific role expectations and socialisation practices male and female tend to develop different traits. They also differ in the strengths they possess. The strengths that predict well-being may also be different for both. The present study was conducted on young adults with the objectives of: i) studying the gender differences in character strengths and psychological well-being and ii) finding the gender specific strengths that predict psychological well-being. The sample consisted of college students (n=249, 31.32% male, 68.67% female) who completed two measures assessing character strengths and psychological well-being. Honesty, kindness and leadership were found among the signature strengths of males and females both. The remaining two were hope and zest for males and fairness and love for females. The lowest five strengths in both were: self-regulation, love of learning, modesty, forgiveness and perspective. Females were significantly higher than males in psychological well-being and in the strengths of love of learning, citizenship, kindness, fairness, forgiveness, modesty and spirituality. The strengths that significantly predicted well-being were also different for males and females. These were perspective, bravery, love, kindness, hope and humour for males and love of learning, love, self-regulation and gratitude for females.

**Key Words:** Character Strengths, Psychological Well-Being, Gender Differences

## 1. Introduction

Human beings are unique creatures. The abilities to think, reason and adapt enable them to manipulate and solve complex problems. That's why not only the external situations but how one interprets and reacts to it is more important in determining well-being. And how one reacts in turn gets determined by his/her traits. Positive psychology focuses on studying the positive traits of personality that are important for well-being. Character strengths are the positive personal resources of a person. These are the morally-valued personality aspects which influence how one thinks, feels or does.

The researchers associated with Values in Action (VIA) classification of strengths identified twenty-four character strengths which were classified under six virtues i.e. wisdom, courage, humanity, justice, temperance and transcendence. Virtues are defined as "qualities desired of people due to intrinsic worth" and Character strengths are "the psychological components making up these virtues." (Park & Peterson, 2006). Table 1 gives a brief description of different virtues and the associated character strengths.

Table 1.

*The VIA-IS: Virtues and Character Strengths*

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Virtue of Wisdom: Acquiring and using knowledge

1. Creativity

Doing things in novel and productive ways.

2. Curiosity Strong desire to know something.
3. Judgement The ability to think critically and take decisions by examining all aspects.
4. Love of Learning Actively acquiring new knowledge and skills.
5. Perspective Ability to provide wise counsel to others.

Virtue of Courage: making good efforts to accomplish goals in opposition

6. Bravery Not shrinking in problems.
7. Persistence [Perseverance] Completing what is started.
8. Honesty Behaving in a genuine way.
9. Zest Acting in enthusiastic way.

Virtue of Humanity: Care for others

10. Love Valuing close relations and feeling self-worth.
11. Kindness The quality of being generous and compassionate.
12. Social Intelligence Ability to understand motives and feelings of self & others.

Virtue of Justice: Contribution to healthy community life

13. Citizenship Doing good teamwork as member of a group.
14. Fairness Treating all equally.
15. Leadership Organizing and overseeing group activities.

Virtue of Temperance: controlling one's own behaviour against excess

16. Forgiveness Forgiving wrong acts of others.
17. Modesty [humility] Not talking much about one's achievements.
18. Prudence Making careful choices.
19. Self-regulation Regulating one's actions or thoughts.

Virtue of Transcendence: Provide meaning or connection to the larger universe

20. Appreciation of beauty Noticing and appreciating beauty and excellence around oneself.
21. Gratitude Noticing and feeling thankful for the good things.
22. Hope Expecting good and making efforts to achieve it.
23. Humour Tendency to joke and laugh.
24. Spirituality Holding belief about meaning in life.

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The present study is aimed at finding the role of these character strengths in the psychological well-being. Well-being is an umbrella term that includes various terms such as happiness, meaning, contentment and life satisfaction. In simple terms well-being includes ability to cultivate positive emotions, overcome negative emotions and be satisfied in life. Recent years research focuses mainly on the perception of people about the extent to which they feel meaningful and worthwhile, and have good relationships with others. This perspective is known as psychological well-being (PWB). Kitchener & Jorm (2002) define it as "a state of mind with an absence of a mental disorder". But from the perspective of positive psychology, it relates to how well we

function and adapt. It includes an individual's ability to enjoy life, creating a balance between different activities and making efforts to achieve satisfaction.

### **Character Strengths and Well-Being**

The strengths of a person play a key role in enhancing his/her well-being. Some strengths have been found to play more important role than others in well-being such as gratitude and hope (Galati, Manzano & Sotgiu, 2006; Meherunissa, 2016; Narula, 2017), self-regulation (Ronen, Tammie & Hamama, Liat & Rosenbaum, Michael & Mishely-Yarlap, Ayla., 2014) etc. Several strengths have been found to be correlated with different well-being measures. Taking life satisfaction as a measure of well-being, Brdar, Anic & Rijavec (2011) found zest, hope and gratitude as having the close association to life satisfaction. They also found that women weighted high the strengths of integrity, kindness, love, gratitude and fairness whereas men weighted high the strengths of integrity, hope, humour, gratitude and curiosity. For men and women, the significant predictors of life satisfaction were also different (Brdar et al. 2011). Studies have also focused on finding the cultural and gender differences in character strengths and its associations with different well-being measures. In a study by Shimai, Otake, Park, Peterson and Seligman (2006), the the Japanese and American young adults showed similar distributions of the 24 strengths. Gender differences across these cultures were also found similar. Zest, hope, curiosity and gratitude showed greater associations with happiness in both samples (Shimai et al. 2006). Gender differences within a culture have also been reported. A study conducted in Indian context by Rani, Midha and Budhiraja (2017) found the signature strengths of judgement, appreciation of beauty and love in both male and female. Zest and perspective were found as signature strengths specifically in male whereas kindness and modesty in female. The researchers concluded that females were more humane whereas males were more courageous (Rani et al. 2017). Another study on UK sample by Linley, Maltby, Wood, Joseph, Harrington & Peterson (2007) reported more similarities than differences between genders.

So, the studies have shown both similarities and differences with respect to gender in the character strengths profile and the strengths that predict well-being.

### **The Present Study**

The present study has been conducted on college going young adults in Indian context. Young adults of this age group usually have a vision and direction in life which provide motivation and enthusiasm for the future. They are concerned with career decisions, attaining the educational qualifications and getting employment. In collectivist societies like India, social pressure and family constraints influence their choices to a great extent and as a result their well-being may also be affected. On the other side, character strengths have been found to play a positive role in well-being. Previous studies have shown that male and female differ in the strengths they possess. There are biosocial factors that create gender differences. According to evolutionary perspective male and female are predisposed to develop certain traits. For example, females possess more of the strengths of kindness and love because of their evolutionary role of nurturing the children, whereas males possess more of the strengths such as bravery and zest because of their evolutionary role as hunter-gatherers (Eagly & Wood, 1999). Also, there are social and cultural differences in the gender specific role expectations. The male and female are expected to play their stereotypical roles that influence their well-being and cause them to develop different traits. Now a days the society is going through a transition period in which the typical gender roles are being challenged. Keeping in view all these things, in this study gender has been taken into consideration as a variable. The first objective of the present study is to explore the gender differences in character strengths and psychological well-being of young adults.

Secondly, we wanted to examine the gender differences in the role played by different character strengths in psychological well-being. Some strengths may be highly correlated to the well-being of male while others to the well-being of female. Because of gender specific role expectations strengths that predict well-being among male may be different from that of female. Thus, the second objective of the present study is to explore the role of different character strengths in predicting psychological well-being of male and female.

## **2. METHODOLOGY**

### **Participants**

The participants in this study were the college students (N=249, 31.32% male, 68.67% female) of age group 18-24 years with  $M_{age}=21.05$ ,  $\sigma=1.73$  for male and  $M_{age}= 20.28$  and  $\sigma=1.79$  for female.

**Measures**

**Character Strengths:**

To measure the character strengths, a 120 items self-report inventory i.e. value in action inventory of strengths (*Peterson & Seligman, 2004*) was used. It uses 5-point likert scale to measure twenty-four character strengths ('1' indicating 'very much unlike me' through '5' indicating 'very much like me'). Each of the twenty-four strengths is measured by five items. The average internal consistency reliability reported is 0.79.

**Psychological Well-Being:**

The Ryff's scale of psychological well-being (*Ryff, 1989*) consisting of 54 items was used here. The statements in the scale reflect different areas of psychological well-being. In this study the overall psychological well-being has been measured. The statements are rated on a scale of 1 to 6, with '1' indicating 'strongly disagree' and '6' indicating 'strongly agree'. Internal consistencies lie between 0.87 and 0.93 and test-retest reliability coefficients lie between 0.81 and 0.85.

**Procedure**

The sample was selected from different colleges across Haryana state using simple random sampling. The data was collected as per the convenience of the participants. The tests were administered individually as well as in groups after taking informed consent and making good rapport. The data was analysed with the help of descriptive statistics and multiple linear regression.

**3. RESULTS**

Results have been reported in Table 2, 3,4 and 5. Table 2 shows the descriptive statistics for the whole sample, male and female. It also shows the t-values and significance level for describing the gender differences in the studied variables. Table 3 shows the top five (i.e. the signature strengths) and the lowest five strengths in male and female students based on the mean values. Table 4 shows the correlation of PWB with different strengths in male and female. Table 5 shows the regression coefficients and significance level to describe which strengths play significant role in predicting well-being.

Table 2

*Descriptive Statistics, t-scores and Level of Significance for Character Strengths and Psychological Well-Being*

Variable	Entire Sample	male	female	t	Sig.(2-tailed)
	(N=249)	(N=78)	(N=171)		
	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)		(p)
Creativity	18.77 (3.37)	18.65 (3.09)	18.82 (3.50)	0.37	.712
Curiosity	18.78 (3.46)	18.99 (3.49)	18.68 (3.45)	-0.65	.514
Judgement	18.59 (2.86)	18.28 (3.09)	18.74 (2.74)	1.16	.245
Love of learning	16.27 (3.39)	15.58 (3.23)	16.58 (3.42)	2.19*	.029
Perspective	18.10 (2.97)	18.06 (3.26)	18.12 (2.84)	0.14	.885
Bravery	18.33 (3.13)	18.15 (2.91)	18.41 (3.23)	0.60	.551
Persistence	18.58 (3.31)	18.55 (3.42)	18.60 (3.26)	0.10	.921
Honesty	20.70 (3.11)	20.62 (3.40)	20.74 (2.98)	0.28	.776

Zest	19.01 (3.19)	19.21 (3.24)	18.92 (3.17)	-0.64	.520
Love	19.46 (3.57)	18.90 (3.64)	19.71 (3.52)	1.68	.095
Kindness	20.50 (2.84)	19.76 (3.09)	20.84 (2.66)	2.82**	.005
Social intelligence	18.96 (3.04)	18.58 (3.11)	19.14 (3.00)	1.36	.175
Citizenship	19.35 (3.14)	18.72 (3.14)	19.64 (3.11)	2.16*	.032
Fairness	19.72 (3.22)	19.05 (3.28)	20.03 (3.15)	2.24*	.026
Leadership	19.77 (3.15)	19.29 (3.34)	19.99 (3.05)	1.61	.108
Forgiveness	17.67 (3.27)	17.00 (3.72)	17.98 (3.00)	2.20*	.028
Modesty	17.24 (2.90)	16.47 (2.88)	17.60 (2.85)	2.87**	.004
Prudence	18.54 (3.06)	18.79 (3.34)	18.43 (2.92)	-0.88	.379
Self-regulation	16.06 (3.50)	15.71 (3.64)	16.22 (3.43)	1.08	.281
Appreciation of beauty	19.41 (2.74)	19.14 (2.88)	19.53 (2.67)	1.03	.304
Gratitude	18.84 (2.80)	18.86 (2.76)	18.84 (2.83)	-0.06	.953
Hope	19.53 (3.11)	19.63 (3.02)	19.49 (3.16)	-0.33	.738
Humour	18.80 (3.42)	18.88 (3.23)	18.77 (3.51)	-0.25	.801
Spirituality	19.39 (2.97)	18.73 (2.96)	19.70 (2.93)	2.40*	.017
PWB	213.69(25.42)	207.21(23.50)	216.65(25.78)	2.75**	.006

Notes: PWB=Psychological Well-Being,

\*\* $p < 0.01$ , \* $p < 0.05$

### Character Strengths of Male and Female

Descriptive statistics (Table 2) shows that for males, the mean of strengths ranged from 15.58 (love of learning) to 20.62 (honesty). For females, it ranged from 16.22 (self-regulation) to 20.84 (kindness). As for gender differences, females were higher on eighteen strengths, while males scored higher only on six strengths which were: curiosity, zest, prudence, gratitude, hope and humour. Among these, Gratitude was almost similar in both. Based on the mean values, the top five (i.e. the signature strengths) and the lowest five strengths in male and female have been reported in table 3.

Table 3

#### *Endorsement of Strengths in male and female*

	Strengths at the top*		Strengths at the bottom**	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
1	Honesty	Kindness	Love of learning	Self-regulation
2	Kindness	Honesty	Self-regulation	Love of learning
3	Hope	Fairness	Modesty	Modesty
4	Leadership	Leadership	Forgiveness	Forgiveness
5	Zest	Love	Perspective	Perspective

\*Shown in decreasing order,

\*\*Shown in increasing order

It can be seen that honesty, kindness and leadership were found among the top five strengths (i.e. signature strengths) of both. Hope and zest were the other two signature strengths for male whereas fairness and love were the other two signature strengths for female. In case of bottom five strengths in the hierarchy of strengths, the male and female shared almost similar profile.

The t-values (table 2) show that there were significant gender differences in the strengths of love of learning ( $p < .05$ ), kindness ( $p < .01$ ), citizenship ( $p < .05$ ), fairness ( $p < .05$ ), forgiveness ( $p < .05$ ), modesty ( $p < .01$ ), spirituality ( $p < .05$ ) and in psychological well-being ( $p < .01$ ). Interestingly, females were significantly higher in all of these. The difference was found even more significant in kindness ( $p < .01$ ), modesty ( $p < .01$ ) and psychological well-being ( $p < .01$ ).

**Role of Character Strengths in Well-Being:**

Correlations of character strengths with the psychological well-being of male and female have been presented in Table 4.

*Table 4: Correlation of different strengths with psychological well-being in male and female*

	PWB (male) (N=78)	PWB (female) (N=171)
1. Creativity	.209	.436**
2. Curiosity	.216	.454**
3. Judgement	.233*	.296**
4. Love of Learning	.090	.201**
5. Perspective	.164	.257**
6. Bravery	.320**	.446**
7. Persistence	.186	.412**
8. Honesty	.272*	.418**
9. Zest	.301**	.484**
10. Love	.322**	.405**
11. Kindness	.315**	.235**
12. Social Intelligence	.219	.354**
13. Citizenship	.215	.395**
14. Fairness	.247*	.349**
15. Leadership	.256*	.426**
16. Forgiveness	.075	.173*
17. Modesty	.127	.105
18. Prudence	.202	.227**
19. Self-Regulation	.024	.246**

20. Appreciation of Beauty	.142	.312**
21. Gratitude	.179	.527**
22. Hope	.432**	.385**
23. Humour	.042	.342**
24. Spirituality	.183	.322**

\*\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

In female, all the strengths showed good association with well-being except modesty. In case of male bravery, zest, love, kindness and hope showed greater associations with well-being. In order to study which of these strengths play significant role in the well-being of male and female young adults, multiple linear regression was performed (see Table 5).

Table 5

*Regression Coefficients of the Selected Regression Models for male and female with Psychological Well-Being as the Dependent Variable*

Predictors	Male				Female			
	B	$\beta$	t	Sig( $\rho$ )	B	$\beta$	t	Sig( $\rho$ )
Constant	119.19		4.37	<.001	73.06		4.06	<.001
Creativity	0.19	.02	0.16	.874	1.11	.15	1.59	.115
Curiosity	-1.55	-.23	-1.20	.236	0.01	.00	0.02	.983
Judgement	0.34	.04	0.22	.825	0.62	.07	0.84	.401
Love of learning	0.04	.07	0.04	.968	-1.33	.18	2.07*	.040
Perspective	-2.70	-.37	-2.13*	.038	-1.24	.14	1.64	.103
Bravery	2.72	.34	2.15*	.036	1.17	.15	1.70	.091
Persistence	0.12	.02	0.11	.917	0.40	.05	0.56	.578
Honesty	-0.43	-.06	-0.34	.736	-0.19	.02	-0.25	.802
Zest	0.37	.05	0.29	.776	1.31	.16	1.81	.073
Love	2.45	.38	2.30*	.025	1.18	.16	2.09*	.038
Kindness	2.92	.38	2.01*	.050	-0.54	.06	-0.75	.455
Social intelligence	0.22	.03	0.18	.859	-0.36	.04	-0.45	.653
Citizenship	-1.18	-.16	0.91	.369	0.85	.10	1.03	.303
Fairness	0.23	.03	0.18	.858	-0.28	.03	-0.37	.715
Leadership	-0.33	-.05	-0.26	.795	1.37	.16	1.81	.072
Forgiveness	0.70	.11	0.73	.466	-0.50	.06	-0.78	.438

Modesty	0.07	.01	0.06	.950	0.10	.01	0.15	.883
Prudence	-0.16	-.02	-0.14	.890	-0.10	.01	-0.14	.887
Self-regulation	-0.27	-.04	-0.32	.747	1.21	.16	2.16*	.033
Appreciation of beauty	-0.08	-.01	-0.07	.947	0.12	.01	0.16	.875
Gratitude	0.07	.01	0.07	.947	2.16	.24	2.68**	.008
Hope	4.38	.56	3.22**	.002	0.72	.09	1.09	.277
Humour	-2.50	-.34	-2.10*	.040	-0.07	.01	-0.12	.901
Spirituality	-1.19	-.15	-0.96	.342	-0.24	.03	-0.35	.727
F	1.67			.06	5.74***			<.001
R2	.431				.486			

Note. B=Unstandardized regression coefficient,  $\beta$ =Standardised regression coefficient

\*\*\* $p < 0.001$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$ , \* $p < 0.05$

The strengths of bravery ( $p < 0.05$ ), love ( $p < 0.05$ ), kindness ( $p < 0.05$ ) and hope ( $p < 0.01$ ) positively predicted the psychological well-being of male. Perspective ( $p < 0.05$ ), and humour ( $p < 0.05$ ) were the negative predictors of well-being for them.

In female, different strengths were found as significant predictors of well-being. These were the strengths of love of learning ( $p < 0.05$ ), love ( $p < 0.05$ ), self-regulation ( $p < 0.05$ ) and gratitude ( $p < 0.01$ ). All of these positively predicted their well-being. Hope in males and gratitude in females emerged as the most significant predictor of well-being. The overall regression model was also found significant for female only,  $F(24,224)$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ,  $R^2 = 0.49$ .

#### 4. DISCUSSION

In most of the cultures, an ideal male is expected to be competent and strong whereas an ideal female is expected to be warm, kind, humble and conforming. Because of social pressure they tend to develop masculine or feminine traits on the basis of their gender. In the present study females were found to be more kind, modest, forgiving, spiritual and were better in doing teamwork and thus possessing more of the 'strengths of heart'. Also, they were found better in treating others equally (fairness) and were keener than male to learn new things. The findings have been supported by some previous studies. For example, researches have shown that girls are more forgiving (Kirmani, 2016) and kind (Ovejero-Bruna and Cardenal-Hernández, 2015). Girls are expected to give more importance to relationships and be tolerant and patient. Also, their nurturing role also makes them more kind and forgiving. Overall female showed higher level of the strengths as compared to male. It is similar to the findings reported by Linley et al. (2007).

In psychological well-being, males were significantly lower, conforming to the previous study by Hasnain, Wazid & Hasan (2014). It may be attributed to several causes. One among those may be that the male is held more responsible for earning livelihood and thus inappropriate career choices or inability to succeed in it may be more frustrating for them. Also, controlling the expression of emotions by male is reinforced by others as a result they learn to suppress their feelings. This may be another cause of their lower well-being. There is need for further researches to find out the possible causes.

The lowest five strengths i.e. the strengths of love of learning, self-regulation, modesty, forgiveness and perspective were the same in male and female. Though female were higher than male in all of these. Some other researchers (Rani et al. 2017; Brdar et al. 2011; Shimai et al. 2006) have also found one or more of these strengths among the lowest ones in the hierarchy. These findings show that youth of today lack self-control and motivation to learn new things. The low level of modesty shows that they seek the spot light and tend to show off their accomplishments. They also don't like to forgive others easily for their mistakes. The low level of

perspective strength shows that they lack wise ways of looking at the situations and thus making decisions often seem difficult to them.

Among the strengths that predicted well-being in male, humour and perspective were found as negative predictors. This has been contradicted by Brdar et al. (2011) who found humour and perspective as positive predictor of well-being in male. The possible cause for humour to be a negative predictor may be use of negative humour style more often. The need is to explore it in detail by using some detailed measure of humour. The previous researchers have found that different humour styles related differently to well-being (Ford, Lappi & Holden, 2016; Martin, 2007). Another strength that emerged as the negative predictor of well-being in male was the strength of perspective that is defined as ability to provide wise counsel to others. The possible cause for this may be their over confidence in their abilities to make right choices and giving valued advice. The strengths of bravery, kindness and hope were found good predictors of well-being in male. Bravery is more desirable of male in society and in line with previous researches it predicted well-being in male. The study also shows kindness and love which come under 'strengths of heart' as good predictors of well-being of male, showing that not only the intellectual strengths but some strengths of the heart are also important for the well-being of male.

The strength of love ( $p < 0.05$ ) predicted well-being in both, indicating that feeling the presence of love in life by reciprocating sharing and caring with close relations predicts well-being across gender. It may be because such mutual exchange creates positive emotions. In case of female, the love of learning, self-regulation and gratitude were the other strengths that significantly predicted psychological well-being. Among these, gratitude played most important role in their well-being which confirms the previous studies. Thus, the female young adults who keep on learning new things, have better sense of self control and feel gratitude more often are found better in psychological well-being. Self-regulation as significant predictor of well-being in female only can be explained in the cultural context where the study has been conducted. In Indian culture, female is expected to exercise more self-restraint. Studies have shown that higher self-control serves as a protective factor against tendency to escape from daily activities (Ozdemir, Kuzucu & Ak, 2014). It serves as a protective factor from acting impulsively and this in turn, is associated with positive evaluations from others, especially in male dominating societies. The feedback of such positive evaluations can be reinforcing enough to add to the psychological well-being. Similarly, gratitude and love as predictors of well-being in female can be attributed to Social expectation from female to be delicate and behave benevolently towards others.

## **5. Limitations and Future Directions**

There are several limitations of the present study. First, because it used self-report measures, the responses may suffer from desirability bias. Second, this study measured endorsement of character strengths rather than usage of specific character strengths. Third, our sample comprised of young adults from colleges because of which the findings can't be generalized to other age groups and other kinds of population. For example, the results may not be true for the less educated or the illiterate population.

## **6. Conclusion**

Gender differences have been found in the endorsement of strengths and psychological well-being. Female were found significantly higher than male in several strengths including kindness, modesty, forgiveness, citizenship, fairness and spirituality. Thus, it can be concluded that they possess more of the strengths of the heart. Different strengths were found to be playing a positive role in the well-being of male and female young adults. These were bravery, love, kindness and hope for male and love of learning, love, self-regulation and gratitude for female. Though, some similarities were also found in the study. Same strengths were found among the lowest five strengths of both. The study can lead to practical implications. Positive psychological interventions aimed at cultivating gender specific strengths to improve the psychological well-being can be developed. In-depth studies by focusing on specific strengths or studies by taking higher order strengths can also be conducted.

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