

Self-Perception, Character Strengths and Happiness Factors among North Indian Adolescents

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ABSTRACT

Positive psychology emphasizes the need to study positive traits related to positive human functioning. These traits help individual flourish beyond mere absence of illness. The concept of self and character strengths is made of many such traits. The present study aimed to understand the perceptions of adolescents about self, character strengths and happiness. A total of 1323 adolescents of North India aged 11-19 years (814 male and 509 female, Mean =15.35 years, SD = 1.39) participated in the study. Qualitative data was collected via semi-structured interviews. Recurring themes were identified and percentage of responses in each category was calculated. Results were mostly found to be similar across gender. Majority of adolescents were found to be satisfied with their physical appearance and dressing style. Character strengths like self-regulation, honesty and kindness were found most desirable in the study. Few differences were noted in description of ideal qualities of a man and woman. Present paper describes comprehensively perceived factors related to self, character strengths and happiness among North Indian adolescents.

Keywords: *Self, Character Strengths, Happiness, Adolescents*

Positive psychology focuses on the need to study positive traits related to positive human functioning^[i, ii]. These traits helps individual flourish beyond mere absence of illness. Adolescents' perception of self, ideal qualities in self & others and character strengths are made of many such traits. Individuals possess these traits in varying degrees thus making up their unique profiles.

Self-Perception has been related to adolescents' mental health and happiness by various researchers ^[iii]. Demographic variables like age, place of residence, gender has also been found related to mental health and happiness of adolescents ^[iv, v].

Peterson and Seligman ^[vi] developed a system of classification of character strengths based on review of historical and contemporary literature across multiple fields such as ethics philosophy and psychology. Their classification includes 24 different strengths of character classified under

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six core virtues (the Values in Action classification, VIA). It has been described in table 1. These strengths are found to differ among people with respect to different cultures and age groups. They represent the components of the good character as measurable positive individual differences that exist as continua and not as categories [vii]. These character strengths were hypothesized to be ubiquitous across culture and history[vi]. However recent literature is pointing towards the possibility that certain strengths that are valued in some cultures, especially eastern cultures may have been neglected [viii, ix]. The development of strengths is viewed as involving processes that are deeply embedded in the individual's culture [x].

Table 1. VIA Classification of Character Strengths

1. **Wisdom and Knowledge** – Cognitive strengths that entail the acquisition and use of knowledge
 - Creativity [originality, ingenuity]: Thinking of novel and productive ways to conceptualize and do things; includes artistic achievement but is not limited to it
 - Curiosity [interest, novelty-seeking, openness to experience]: Taking an interest in ongoing experience for its own sake; finding subjects and topics fascinating; exploring and discovering
 - Judgment [critical thinking]: Thinking things through and examining them from all sides; not jumping to conclusions; being able to change one's mind in light of evidence; weighing all evidence fairly
 - Love of Learning: Mastering new skills, topics, and bodies of knowledge, whether on one's own or formally; obviously related to the strength of curiosity but goes beyond it to describe the tendency to add systematically to what one knows
 - Perspective [wisdom]: Being able to provide wise counsel to others; having ways of looking at the world that make sense to oneself and to other people
2. **Courage** – Emotional strengths that involve the exercise of will to accomplish goals in the face of opposition, external or internal
 - Bravery [valor]: Not shrinking from threat, challenge, difficulty, or pain; speaking up for what is right even if there is opposition; acting on convictions even if unpopular; includes physical bravery but is not limited to it
 - Perseverance [persistence, industriousness]: Finishing what one starts; persisting in a course of action in spite of obstacles; “getting it out the door”; taking pleasure in completing tasks
 - Honesty [authenticity, integrity]: Speaking the truth but more broadly presenting oneself in a genuine way and acting in a sincere way; being without pretense; taking responsibility for one's feelings and actions
 - Zest [vitality, enthusiasm, vigor, energy]: Approaching life with excitement and energy; not doing things halfway or halfheartedly; living life as an adventure; feeling alive and activated
3. **Humanity** - Interpersonal strengths that involve tending and befriending others
 - Love: Valuing close relations with others, in particular those in which sharing and caring are reciprocated; being close to people
 - Kindness [generosity, nurturance, care, compassion, altruistic love, "niceness"]: Doing favors and good deeds for others; helping them; taking care of them

- Social Intelligence [emotional intelligence, personal intelligence]: Being aware of the motives and feelings of other people and oneself; knowing what to do to fit into different social situations; knowing what makes other people tick
4. **Justice** - Civic strengths that underlie healthy community life
- Teamwork [citizenship, social responsibility, loyalty]: Working well as a member of a group or team; being loyal to the group; doing one's share
 - Fairness: Treating all people the same according to notions of fairness and justice; not letting personal feelings bias decisions about others; giving everyone a fair chance.
 - Leadership: Encouraging a group of which one is a member to get things done, and at the same time maintaining good relations within the group; organizing group activities and seeing that they happen.
5. **Temperance** – Strengths that protect against excess
- Forgiveness: Forgiving those who have done wrong; accepting the shortcomings of others; giving people a second chance; not being vengeful
 - Humility: Letting one's accomplishments speak for themselves; not regarding oneself as more special than one is
 - Prudence: Being careful about one's choices; not taking undue risks; not saying or doing things that might later be regretted
 - Self-Regulation [self-control]: Regulating what one feels and does; being disciplined; controlling one's appetites and emotions
6. **Transcendence** - Strengths that forge connections to the larger universe and provide meaning
- Appreciation of Beauty and Excellence [awe, wonder, elevation]: Noticing and appreciating beauty, excellence, and/or skilled performance in various domains of life, from nature to art to mathematics to science to everyday experience
 - Gratitude: Being aware of and thankful for the good things that happen; taking time to express thanks
 - Hope [optimism, future-mindedness, future orientation]: Expecting the best in the future and working to achieve it; believing that a good future is something that can be brought about
 - Humor [playfulness]: Liking to laugh and tease; bringing smiles to other people; seeing the light side; making (not necessarily telling) jokes
 - Spirituality [faith, purpose]: Having coherent beliefs about the higher purpose and meaning of the universe; knowing where one fits within the larger scheme; having beliefs about the meaning of life that shape conduct and provide comfort

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Hence investigation of cultural influence on distribution of character strengths, perceptions of self and happiness was carried out in the present study. Gender differences in perceptions of self and character strengths and their relationship to happiness was also investigated. It could be noted that recently theories in positive psychology promoted the positive effects and role of the

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character strengths for self-motivation, regulation and affect [^{xi}]. Furthermore even though the application of individual signature strengths is also found to be related to overall positive experiences like life satisfaction, well-being, and meaning in life [^{xii}, ^{xiii}, ^{xiv}], not much research work can be found when it comes to positive traits/character strengths in Indian setting [^{xv}, ^{xvi}, ^{xvii}]. Such Investigation is also found helpful in designing intervention for adolescents [^{xviii}].

METHOD

Participants

A total of 1323 adolescents participated in the study. Out of them, 61.53% (N = 814) were boys and 38.47% (N = 509) were girls with age range between 11 and 19 years (M = 15.35 years, SD = 1.39): 24.69% of the participants were in the range 11-14 years and 75.31% in the range 15-19 years. Participants were enrolled in state run government schools (39.41%) and private schools (60.59%). They belonged to both rural (35.19%) and urban (64.81%) settings.

Semi Structured Interviews

The semi-structured interview questionnaire was provided in accordance with the linguistic comfort of the participants. Qualitative data about participants' perception of Self like 'Are you satisfied with your physical appearance (the way you look-your height, weight and outer appearance)?', 'Are you satisfied with your dressing style?' etc., Character strengths like 'Which character strengths you want to develop in your personality?', 'What are the three ideal qualities a man should have?', etc. and Happiness like 'What makes you happy in your life?' etc. was collected. They were free to write in as much detail as they desired.

Procedure

The study was a part of bigger project conducted to understand various factors affecting mental health of north Indian adolescents. The researchers contacted various schools located in Delhi-NCR and adjoining rural areas of Haryana to obtain permission for data collection. The permission was sought from the school principal and a consent letter was signed by the school authorities. Participants were briefed about the nature of the study and consent was taken. Students' timely doubts were clarified. They were assured of confidentiality of information. Responses given by the participants have been considered under multiple response categories wherever appropriate. Consequently, the percentage calculation in the results section is based on total number of responses rather than respondents for each question.

RESULTS

It has been divided into three sections. Section 1: Self Perception, Section 2: Character Strengths and Section 3: Happiness Factors.

Section 1: Self-Perception

The following section shows the questions asked and the response categories that emerged from the obtained qualitative data about adolescents perception of their physical appearance, dressing style and different activities pursued. The results are depicted in the form of bar graphs

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Q 1 Are you satisfied with your physical appearance (the way you look-your height, weight and outer appearance)?

Results were found to be similar across gender. Majority of adolescents (Male = 66.96% and Female = 62.65%) reported Yes, followed by 19.13% Male and 21.74% Female reporting No. Small percentage of adolescents answered Undecided (Male = 13.91% and Female = 15.61%).

Q 2 Are you satisfied with your dressing style?

Similar results were found among males and females in response to satisfaction with the dressing style as well. Majority of adolescents reported being satisfied with their dressing sense (Male = 83.54 % and Female = 85.07%), followed by 11.97% of males and 11.20% of females stating they had never thought about it. Very few adolescents (Male = 4.49% and Female = 3.73%) reported being dissatisfied with their dressing style.

Q 3. (a) What is the average time (in hours) spent by you per day on different activities?

Average time Spent per day on Sports Activities (Males = 1.41 hrs. and Females = 1.00 hr.), Watching Television (Males = 1.69 hrs. and Females = 1.62 hrs.), Studying (Males = 3.57 hrs. and Females = 3.82 hrs.), Helping in household work (Males = 1.82 hrs. and Females = 1.39 hrs.) and any other (Males = 2.65 hrs. and Females = 1.95 hrs.). Other activities listed by Males were listening to music, playing video games and females were listening to music and talking to friends

Q 3 (b) Which programmes do you often watch on TV?

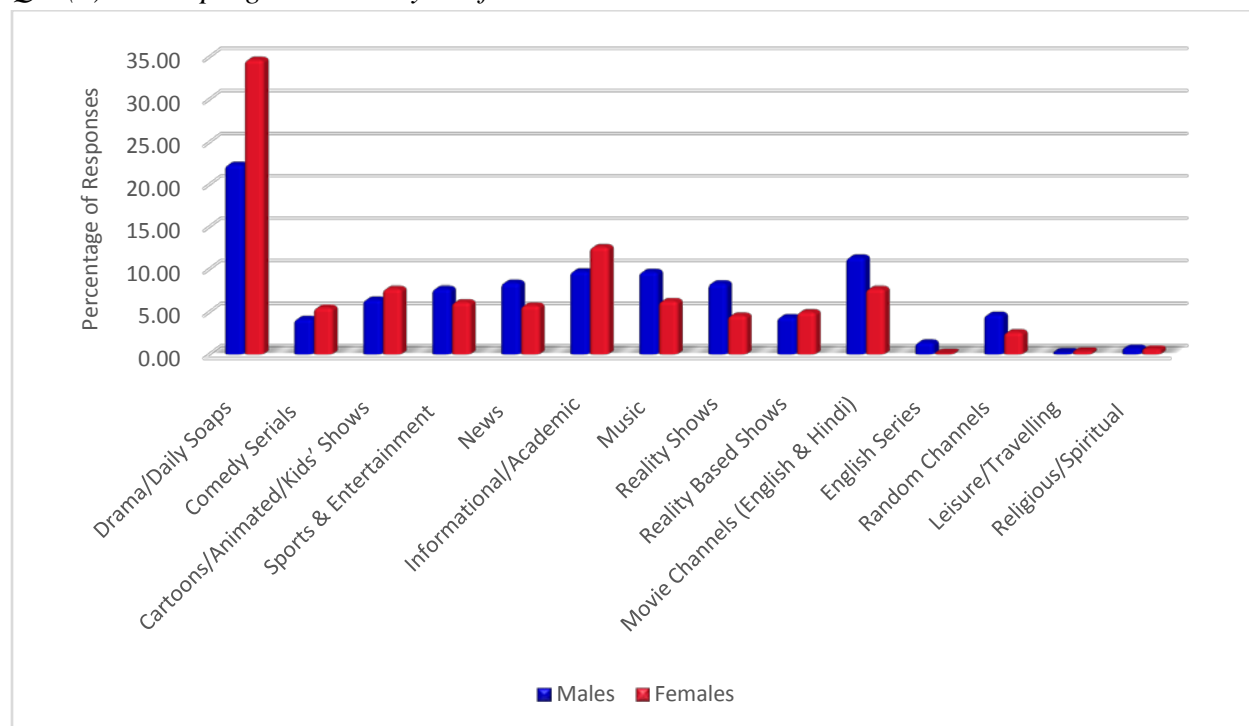


Figure 1: Different TV programmes watched by adolescents

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Most often watched TV programmes were Drama/Daily Soaps. Adolescents also reported watching Informational/Academic programmes, movie channels, music programmes, news, reality shows, sports entertainment, animated shows and comedy serials in descending order.

Section 2: Character Strengths

This section shows the questions asked and the response categories that emerged from the obtained qualitative data about adolescents perception of character strengths and ideal qualities of self and others. The results are depicted in the form of bar graphs

Q4. Identify three character strengths that you feel you have:

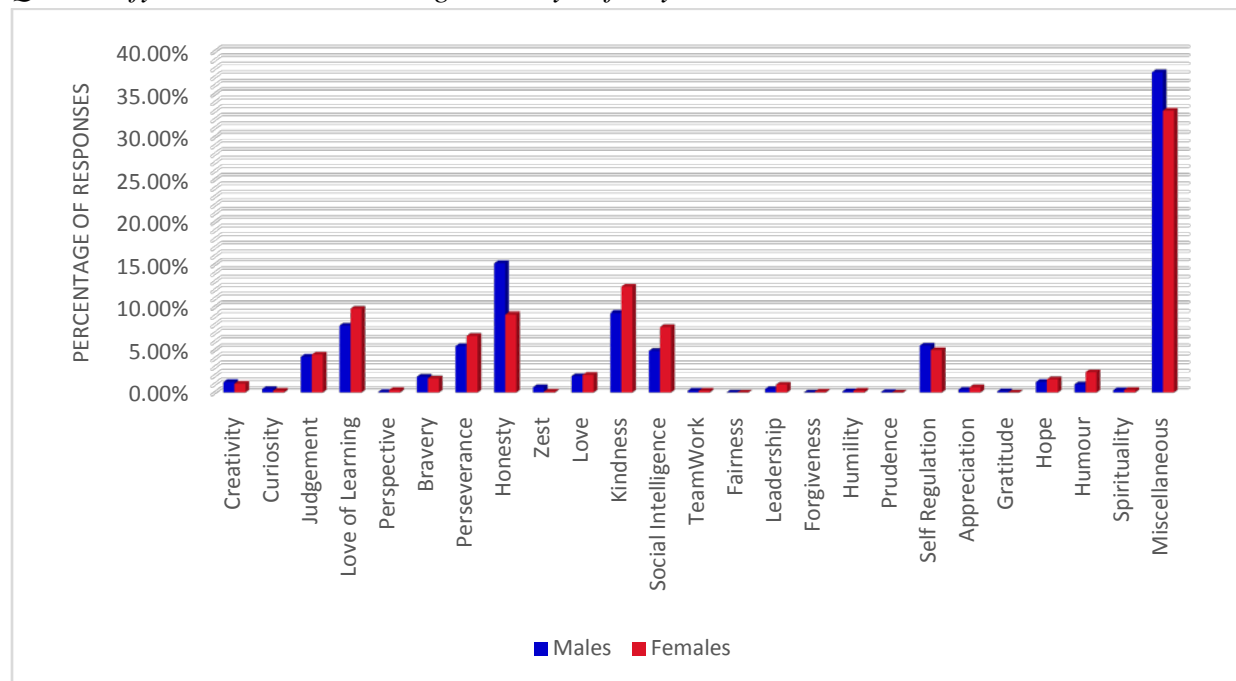


Figure 2: Character strengths in self as perceived by adolescents

Value in action (VIA) inventory was used as a manual for classification, though cultural factors were taken into consideration and hence miscellaneous responses were also categorized separately. It was noted that around 35% responses (males = 37.55% and females = 33.02%) were miscellaneous. For example obedience, respectful to elderly, helping in household work and confidence were most frequently reported character strengths by adolescents. From the VIA classification most commonly endorsed character strengths were (in descending order) Honesty, Kindness, Social Intelligence, Self-Regulation and Judgment while least endorsed character strengths were prudence, fairness, forgiveness and humility. In addition females reported more kindness (males = 9.31% and females = 12.40%) Love of Learning (male = 7.88% and females = 9.79%) and social intelligence (males = 4.90% and females = 7.71%) while males reported more honesty (males = 15.15% and females = 9.17%).

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Q5. Do you have facilitating environment to use your character strengths? Options a) Yes and b) No

Majority of adolescents (males = 82.47 % and females = 86.82 %) reported Yes. Few of them (males = 17.53% and females = 13.18%) reported No.

Q6. Which Character Strengths do you want to develop in your personality?

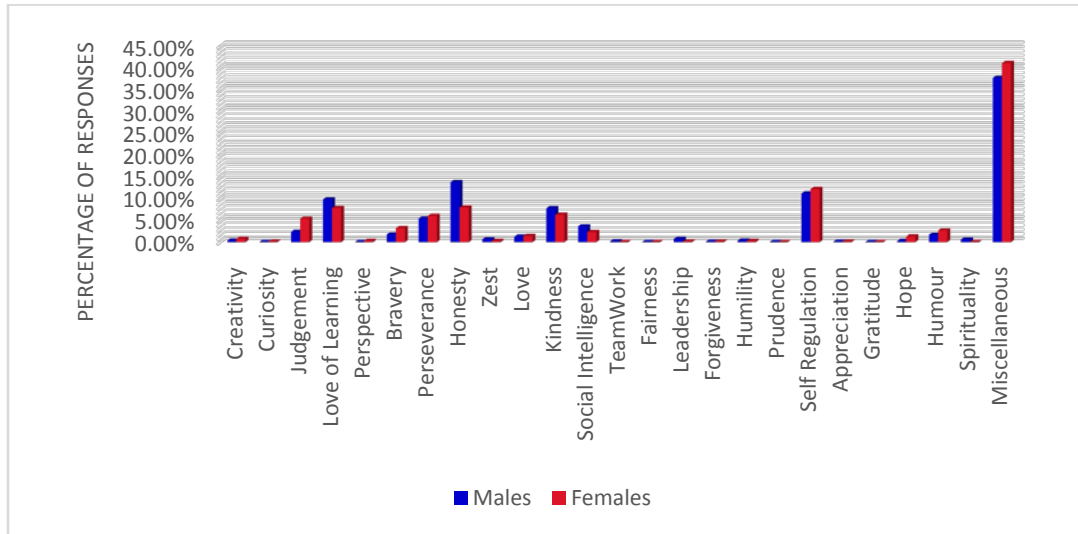


Figure 3: Character strengths desired by adolescents

Around 39% of the responses (males = 37.72 and females = 41.11%) were miscellaneous. Most common responses for desired character strengths were Confidence and Physical Attributes like fairness, height, built. From the VIA classification most commonly endorsed character strengths were (in descending order) were honesty, self-regulation, love of learning, kindness, perseverance and judgement. Gender differences were found in the perception of importance given to the character strengths like honesty (males = 13.85% and females = 7.99%) and love of learning (males = 9.86% and females = 7.86%).

Q7. What three Ideal Qualities a Man Should Have?

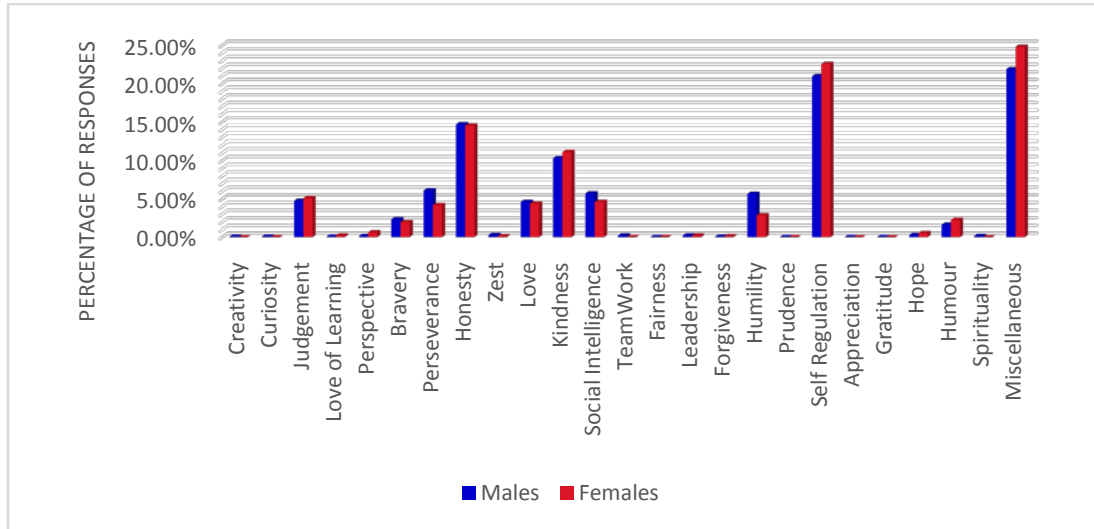


Figure 4: Ideal qualities of a man perceived by adolescents

Responses to this question were also classified with the help of VIA inventory. Though a major percentage of responses by both males (21.87%) and females (24.80%) could not be classified in too any of the 24 categories. Adolescents endorsed respect, confidence and physical attributes like good built, muscular, handsome etc. as Ideal qualities of a man. Other than that Self-Regulation, Honesty, Perseverance, Social Intelligence, Humility, Judgement and Love were commonly endorsed as Ideal qualities of a man, while prudence, gratitude and fairness were least endorsed.

Q8. What three Ideal qualities a Woman should have?

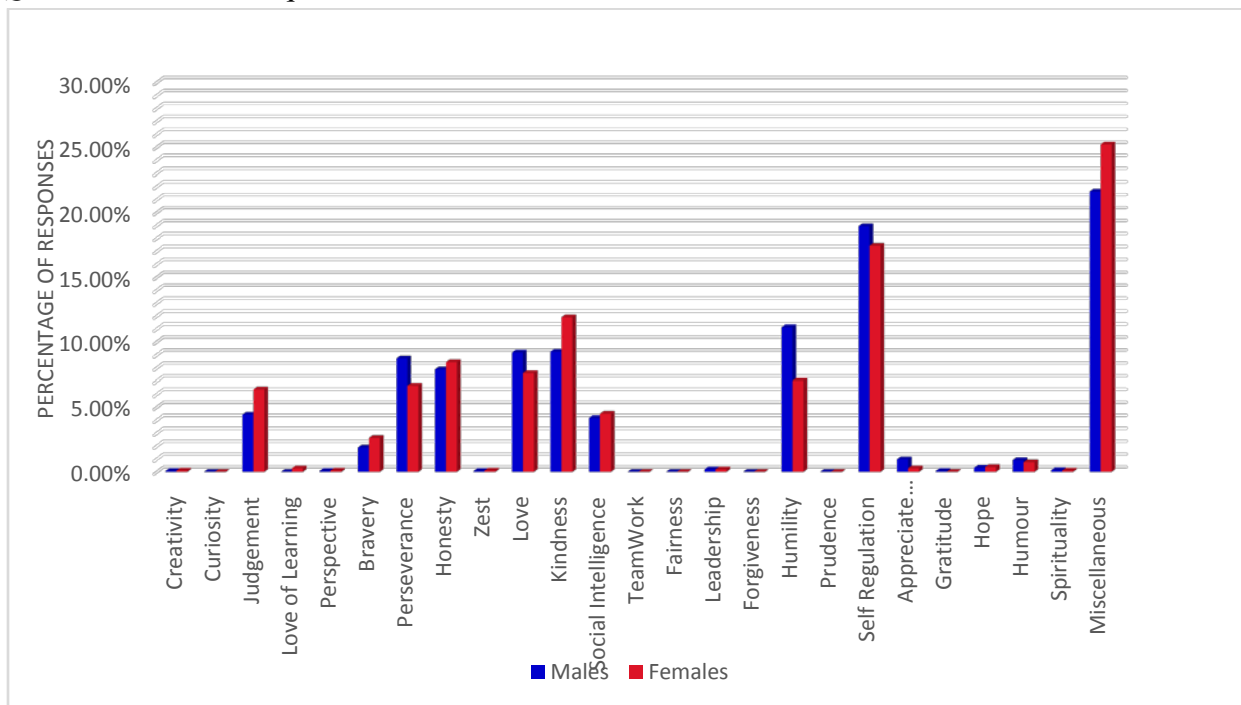


Figure 5: Ideal qualities of a woman perceived by adolescents

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Around 23% of responses could be categorised as miscellaneous (male = 21.61% and females = 25.21%). Beautiful, well educated, good voice and slim physique were endorsed as Ideal qualities of a woman. Adolescents also endorsed Self-Regulation, Kindness, Humility, Love, Perseverance, Honesty and Judgement. Prudence, fairness, forgiveness and curiosity were least endorsed.

Q9. What three Ideal qualities all people should possess?

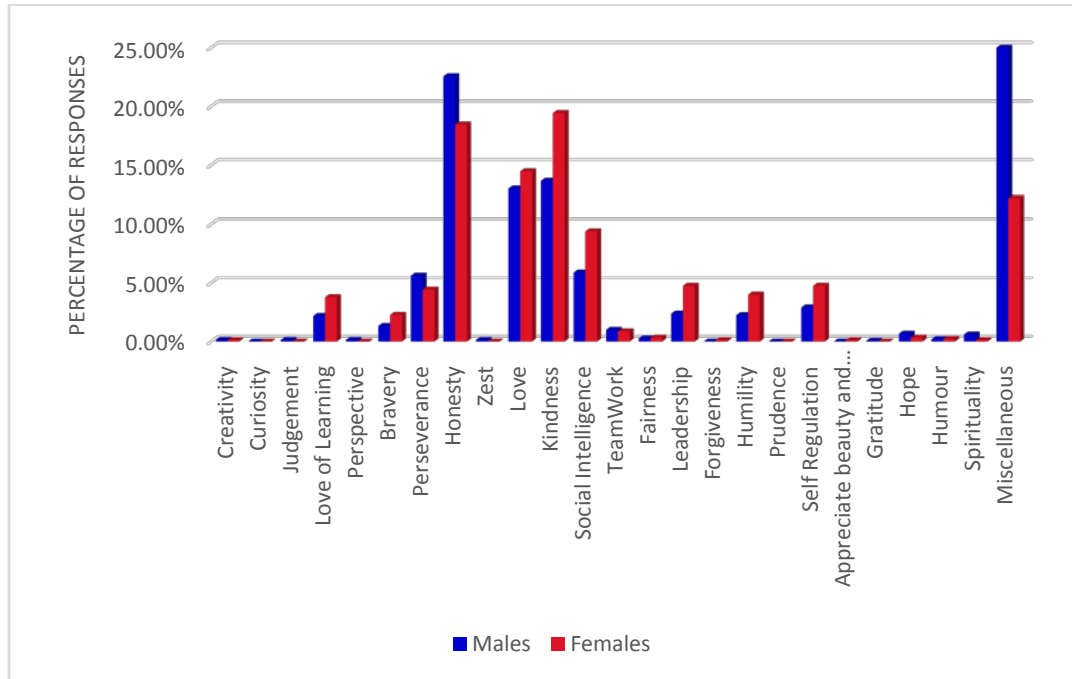


Figure 6: Ideal qualities of all people perceived by adolescents

Majority of responses were miscellaneous (male = 25.00% and females = 12.19%). Most commonly endorsed quality being respectful towards elders and family. Honesty, Kindness, Love, Social intelligence and Perseverance were also reported as Ideal qualities (in descending order). Prudence, forgiveness and curiosity were least endorsed.

Section 3: Happiness Factors

This section shows the questions asked and the response categories that emerged from the obtained qualitative data about adolescents perception of factors related to happiness. The results are depicted in the form of bar graphs

Q10. What makes you happy in your life?

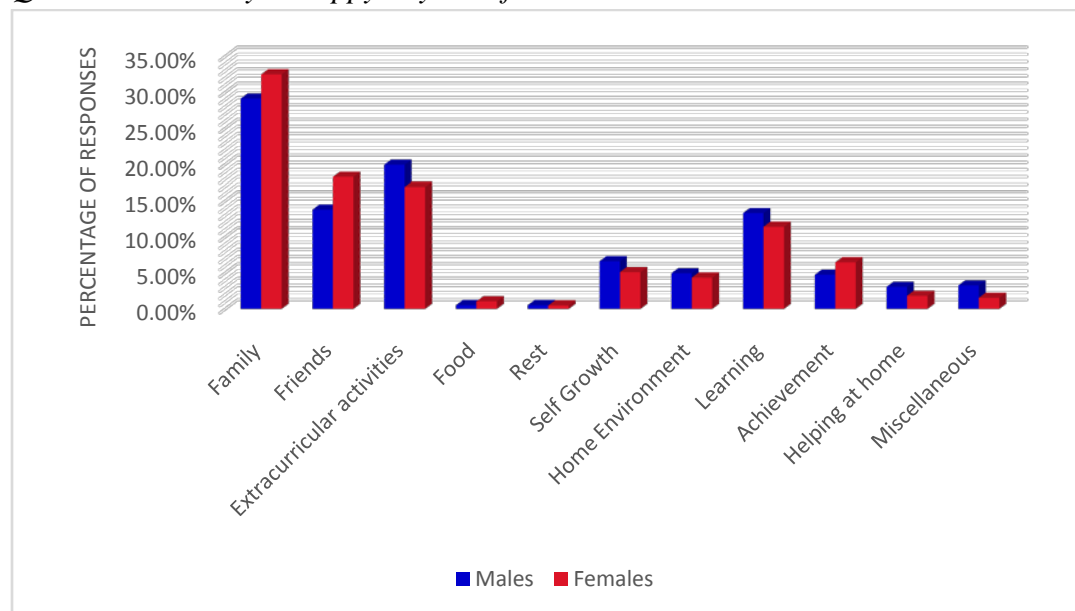


Figure7: Different factors for happiness perceived by adolescents

Family, extra-curricular activities, friends, learning, self-growth, achievement, home-environment, helping at home, food and rest emerged as most prevalent factors affecting adolescents’ happiness.

DISCUSSION

This study explored deeper into the culture influences on perception of self, character strengths and factors affecting happiness. Results revealed that most adolescents were satisfied with their physical appearance and dressing style. They spent most hours studying, followed by watching T.V and helping in household work.

Perceptions of character strengths in self were mostly similar across gender. As mentioned earlier VIA inventory was used a manual to classify character strengths, though cultural factors were taken into consideration and hence miscellaneous responses were also categorized separately. From the 24 character strengths mentioned by Peterson and Seligman [3], honesty, kindness, social intelligence, self-regulation and judgement were most commonly endorsed by adolescents. The results are in coherence with previous researches [xix,xv].Our predominantly collectivistic culture is likely to support the development of these strengths as well as the value of these strengths in the minds of individuals. It could be noticed that males endorsed honesty more than kindness while females reported vice versa. This is not very surprising given the fact that various other studies also report similar results [6,xx]. Research suggests that there are gender differences in terms of salience/accessibility of different types of social selves [xxi]. As per evolutionary perspective females are high on character strengths like kindness due to maternal instincts. Moreover it can be attributed to the social and cultural factors where kindness is endorsed more in females.

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Honesty, self-regulation, love of learning and kindness were reported as most desired character strengths. In addition males endorsed honesty more while for females it was self regulation. Here again culture and social conditioning plays an important role. The sense of belongingness that is essential need for humans may be satisfied in a different way in men and women [1⁷]. Such differences may result in variances in frequency and nature of experiences between the two genders, that in turn may differentially cultivate social and interpersonal strengths in men and women as seen in this study.

A high percentage of responses were miscellaneous. On analysing the miscellaneous responses, it was found that obedience, being respectful to adults, helping in house hold work etc. were considered as important character strengths by Indian adolescents. These findings may be understood in the light of the literature that indicates that family occupies a central position in the lives of Indian adolescents [xxii, xxiii, xxiv]. India being a collective culture supports development of values like family orientedness in individuals. This is also one of the reasons why it was required to explore culture specific character strengths, perceptions of self and Character strengths in addition to the VIA classification.

Ideal qualities of a man were reported as self regulation, honesty, kindness and perseverance (in descending order). A high percentage of miscellaneous responses were also found. It constituted of Respect, Confidence and Physical Attributes like good built, muscular and handsome. Ideal qualities of a woman were reported as self-regulation, kindness, humility, love, perseverance and honesty (in descending order). Other qualities included physical attributes like beautiful, good voice and slim physique. On the whole, the gender differences seen in our study seem to make intuitive sense in the background of the available literature. Differential development of types of ideal selves between males and females is likely to be a by-product of variances in socialization practices, values attached to different strengths for different genders as well as their experience with situations that promote or restrict development of some strengths over the others. It could also be noted that physical attributes hold importance in adolescence, especially while describing an Ideal man or a woman. These attributes were not categorized under appreciation of beauty to display the differences in perception of Character strengths for a male and a female.

Most commonly endorsed Ideal qualities for all people in descending order were honesty, kindness, love and social intelligence. It could be noted that Love was endorsed as an Ideal quality across both genders. It could be devoted to the fact that Peer relationships serve as an important protective factor [xxv, xxvi]. Thus, also contributing to their happiness.

Talking about factors affecting happiness in adolescents, it should be noted that interpersonal relationships with parents, friends, extra-curricular activities and learning were perceived as most important contributors to the happiness. These findings align with those of another study which signifies the importance of family, peer group relationships, leisure activities in positive mental health of adolescents [xxvii]. Social relationships are found as one of the important factors of

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positive mental health of adolescents in Indian population [4]. Supportive parent-adolescent relationships provide a valuable source of support for adolescents dealing with life problems [xxviii, xxix, xxx]. However, emerging evidence about the prevalence of a “peer-culture” among urban Indian youth also deserves attention [xxxi]. Adolescents need relationships with peers who can serve a variety of functions, including providing guidance, companionship, and intimacy [xxxii].

Present findings can be utilized by policy makers in their decisions related to adolescent health and well-being. The strengths most robustly endorsed and revealed by adolescents can also be utilized in building interventions in various school and counselling settings.

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