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ASSESSING 21ST-CENTURY LEADERSHIP CHARACTER STRENGTHS OF GENERATION Z: EVIDENCE FROM UNDERGRADUATE BUSINESS STUDENTS IN LAHORE

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ABSTRACT

The need of the hour now is to have individuals who can go beyond the limits of technical expertise and are willing to work in complex situations and contribute to the sustainable growth of the organization in a competitive business environment. Over the last decade, there has been a growing interest in researching character-based leadership, but empirical evidence for this research is limited in the context of Pakistan, especially for business students of Gen-Z. This study aimed to measure the twenty-first-century leadership character (21st CLC) strengths of Gen-Z undergraduate students in the business stream and whether there is any difference between the 21st CLC strengths of male and female students. A self-developed, structured questionnaire based on the 21st CLC model of Advani and Mergenthaler (2024) was used to collect the data from the 452 final-year undergraduate students of business departments at Lahore. The level of each character strength was evaluated using one-sample and independent-samples t-tests, and differences between genders were tested. Transcendence showed up as the most prominent trait of leadership among those who responded, and Wisdom and Courage were less developed traits. The top individual strengths were Purpose-driven Practices, Performance Recognition, Appreciation, and Collaboration. There were generally higher scores for 21st CLC by female students than by male students, with this difference being significant for several virtues and strengths. These results indicate that, in particular, male students should be targeted in leadership development programs to give them more skills and characteristics needed to lead in the modern business environment, and that business schools have a responsibility to ensure that they focus on developing the specific values and traits of Wisdom and Courage in students of Gen Z.

Keywords: Leadership Character Strengths, Generation Z, Business Students, Gender Differences, VIA Classification.

INTRODUCTION

Driven by fast-changing technology, tightly coupled global markets and evolving socio-economic structures, business is being transformed in the 21st century. Effective leadership in such an environment requires far more than technical ability, ethical judgment, psychological strengths and interpersonal skills to operate in a highly

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networked arena of stakeholders. Meanwhile, the human resource that passes through the business school is also different: Students of Generation Z (Gen-Z) are now the ones being trained to enter this world, with their expectations and ways of working. To determine their readiness to lead is thus an academic and an economic question in understanding these students.

This is especially relevant in Pakistan, where the majority of the population is below 30 (Gen Z). How well these graduates are prepared to lead will have a significant impact on the country's economic trajectory. However, the leadership methods that are historically employed to evaluate leadership potential include the wrong kind of assessments — the trait-based assessment of leadership traits and qualities, and the competency-based assessment of skills and abilities — evaluations that miss the internal, non-cognitive dimension of character that is so fundamental to authentic leadership.

Positive psychology is one possibility for bridging this divide. Character strengths are defined as consistent, positive psychological qualities that influence the way people think, feel, and act (Peterson & Park, 2009) and the Values in Action (VIA) framework provides a structure for understanding how people use character strengths to pursue goals and lead others. From this perspective, traits that are generally seen to be essential to 21st-century leadership (such as creativity, adaptability, emotional intelligence, co-operation) are not just skills, but elements of the underlying character strengths.

While international research has started looking at these strengths for students, the character of Gen-Z business graduates in Pakistan has not been studied extensively. This study aims to fill this gap by exploring the 21st-century leadership character (21st CLC) strengths and virtues of Gen-Z undergraduate students of business in Lahore city and comparing them based on gender. The results will serve as a basis for business educators, curriculum planners, and corporate recruiters to build young people's leadership skills in a developing economy.

Problem Statement

Although leadership develops through a combination of traits and competencies, such frameworks may be limited in their capacity to provide insight into the underlying quality of leadership that can persist beyond training and support the ethical and resilient leadership required in business (Katz, 1955; Stogdill, 1948; Intagliata et al., 2000; Kets de Vries & Korotov, 2010). This has resulted in character-based approaches being given more attention, which highlight the long-term ethical traits that influence the way leaders think, make decisions and act (Peterson & Seligman, 2004; Seijts et al., 2017; Advani & Mergenthaler, 2024). Given that Generation Z is a significant and growing share of the youth population and workforce in Pakistan (Economic Survey of Pakistan, 2023), there is a lack of empirical studies to explore the leadership character strengths of Gen-Z business students and their differences in the case of males and females. With this evidence gap, universities have reduced capacity to develop specific character education and student leadership programs for students' real strengths and developmental needs (Advani & Mergenthaler, 2024; Yılmaz et al., 2024).

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Research Questions

1. What are the levels of the 6 Virtues and 24 Character Strengths of the 21st CLC model among the Business Students from Gen-Z at Lahore University?

2. How different are the levels of these virtues and character strengths between boys and girls in the school?

Research Objectives

- To evaluate the presence of Six 21st CLC Virtues and 24 character strengths of Gen-Z undergraduate business students.

- To compare boys and girls on the levels of these virtues and character strengths.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Putra (2016) defines generation as a group of people who share the same birth years and shared experiences. Generation Z, those born between 1995 and 2012 (Timori Kansaki et al., 2021), have been born into the digital era, and this is reflected in their communication, learning and expectations of authenticity by the institutions that surround them. This cohort is not a fringe group in Pakistan either: Data from the Economic Survey of Pakistan (2023) estimates that over 71 million people (29.5%) in Pakistan are in this age group. These are the qualities that make Gen-Z a generation to be managed well: they are socially conscious, connected to the digital world, self-sufficient, concerned about social justice, and demanding quick solutions (Asar, 2022; Peramesti & Kusmana, 2018)

This picture is supported by recent qualitative research on Gen-Z aspiring leaders' own leadership aspirations, which reveals that aspiring leaders are attracted to supportive and empathetic, low-ego and people-focused management styles, but not hierarchical or output-focused ones (Yılmaz et al., 2024).

So, seeing leadership through the Gen-Z lens has shifted the focus from focusing on the technical skills of leadership to a strengths-based focus — one that sees existing character strengths as the foundation for creating twenty-first-century leaders. This transformation is accentuated when placed in the context of a higher education system in Pakistan, where Gen-Z students are faced with an economy that is quickly becoming digital-oriented, while still being tied to relatively traditional cultural structures that require the integration of a combination of future-oriented intrapersonal agility and culturally situated interpersonal harmony.

Character Strengths as a Base for Leadership Development.

There have been several stages in the development of leadership theory. The trait approach has emphasized certain personal qualities, such as personality, physical presence and intelligence (Stogdill, 1948), which distinguished leaders from non-leaders, suggesting that leadership is innate and that leaders are born. The competency approach that ensued emphasized skills and abilities that are developable (Katz, 1995). In turn, contingency theories suggested that there is no single leadership style for all situations; that effectiveness is related to task structure, positional power and

environment. Competency models are still used in organizations, but can become outdated when job requirements change. The question is again reframed in the character-strength approach, which draws on positive psychology (Peterson & Park, 2009): What is a leader at his core, instead of asking what does a leader have or what can a leader do? Skills are noted as being subject to obsolescence (Intagliata et al., 2000), and character is seen as being more stable and ethically sound as a foundation for leadership development and thus more enduring (Kets de Vries & Korotov, 2010).

The Values in Action (VIA) classification, developed by Peterson and Seligman, categorizes 24 character strengths under six overarching virtues: wisdom, courage, humanity, justice, temperance and transcendence (Peterson & Park, 2009). While the economy and business landscape is in constant flux, a pattern of human-centric competencies has emerged across strengths-based leadership models, and a pattern of human-centric competencies aligns closely with the VIA strengths, as argued by Advani and Mergenthaler (2024). Most of the twenty-first-century leadership competencies that leaders have been expected to exhibit are already included within the VIA/21st CLC, confirming that effective leadership is built on enduring character strengths, not an ever-changing competency list (Seijts et al., 2017; Shek & Yu, 2015).

There is moderate evidence that training on these strengths is effective. The emotional drivers of curiosity, zest, hope, humor and gratitude correlate with feelings of life satisfaction; academic achievement correlates with perseverance (Advani & Mergenthaler, 2024; Ferradás et al., 2021; Azañedo et al., 2020; Hausler et al., 2017; Proyer et al., 2015; Weber & Ruch, 2012; Proyer et al., 2012; Lounsbury et al., 2009). Generally, character strengths have been associated with improved physical health, well-being, academic success, and healthy relationships. In the workplace specifically, higher levels of character strengths are associated with higher levels of job satisfaction, job performance, work engagement, creative performance, and organizational citizenship behavior (Bakker & Van Wingerden, 2021; Harzer et al., 2021; Harzer & Ruch, 2015; Kalyar & Kalyar, 2018; Van Woerkom et al., 2016), and lower levels of stress and reduced turnover (Harzer & Ruch, 2015).

Table 1: Mapping of VIA Character Strengths to 21st CLC Strengths

Virtue	Character Strength (Peterson & Seligman, 2004)	21st CLC Strength (Advani & Mergenthaler, 2024)
Wisdom	1. Creativity	Innovation
	2. Curiosity	Exploration
	3. Judgment	Decision-making
	4. Love of Learning	Continuous Learning
	5. Perspective	Strategic Visioning
Courage	6. Bravery	Confident Advocacy
	7. Perseverance	Results Orientation
	8. Honesty	Trustworthiness
	9. Zest	Positive Engagement
Humanity	10. Love	Network Building
	11. Kindness	Supportive Behaviour
	12. Social Intelligence	Cultural Awareness

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Justice	13. Teamwork	Collaboration
	14. Fairness	Ethical Practice
	15. Leadership	Team Leadership
Temperance	16. Forgiveness	Forgiveness
	17. Humility	Self-awareness
	18. Prudence	Judicious Decision-making
	19. Self-regulation	Self-management
Transcendence	20. Appreciation of Excellence	Performance Recognition
	21. Gratitude	Appreciation
	22. Hope	Optimism
	23. Humor	Positive Work Environment
	24. Spirituality	Purpose-driven Practices

The literature implies that it is not the competency inventories, but the character strengths that business schools need to be developing if they are to produce twenty-first-century leaders. Higher education is a logical place for developing character strengths as young graduates tend to have limited leadership experience, which can be developed and practiced (Advani & Mergenthaler, 2024).

Theoretical Framework

The research study is based on the positive psychology paradigm described by Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000), which shifted the approach of psychological research from almost exclusively studying deficits and pathology to a systematic examination of human strengths and optimal functioning. In this framework, the Values in Action (VIA) Classification of Character Strengths and Virtues (Peterson & Seligman, 2004) includes the specific theoretical structure for the present study: 24 measurable character strengths (CSs) categorized within 6 broad virtues (VAs), which are used as the "building blocks" of a well-functioning, ethical personality. In the present context, the 21st CLC model proposed by Advani and Mergenthaler (2024) has been operationalized for a leadership context, where each of the VIA strengths is translated into an equivalent leadership-relevant strength (Table 1). These perspectives help bolster the study's theoretical argument (which is the focus of the remainder of the paper): The research found that leadership readiness among Gen-Z business students is not a one-time occurrence, nor is it a list of trainable skills, but rather the manifestation of enduring character traits that can be measured, benchmarked, and (over time) developed.

Conceptual Framework

Based on the theoretical framework discussed above, the conceptual model for the study is based on the assumption that six VIA-derived virtues (Wisdom, Courage, Humanity, Justice, Temperance, and Transcendence) and 24 strengths (21st CLC; subset of the VIA strengths) are the outcome variables of interest, and they are all evaluated against a fixed benchmark score that is self-endorsement of that strength. Gender is used as a comparative variable and analyzed in terms of its relationships with the levels of these virtues and strengths. This gives two conceptual ways of looking at the data: (1) the absolute level of each virtue and strength compared to the benchmark

and (2) the relative level of each virtue and strength between the male and female respondents.

Study Hypotheses

H_1: The mean scores for Gen-Z undergraduate business students fall at or above the acceptable benchmark score on the 21st CLC virtues and character strengths.

H_2: Male and Female Gen-Z undergraduate business students are significantly different with respect to the levels of 21st CLC virtues, in the sense that females have higher levels than males.

H_3: Male and Female Gen-Z undergraduate business students exhibit significantly different levels of individual 21st CLC character strengths, with female students having a higher level.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A quantitative research design was adopted because it suited the study's aim of objectively measuring respondents' self-perceptions against predetermined constructs (Creswell, 2009).

Participants

Data were collected from final-year undergraduate business students in Lahore. Final-year students were targeted specifically because they are best positioned to reflect on the character strengths they believe they have developed over their academic journey, just before entering the labor market. Of 465 questionnaires initially collected, thirteen were excluded for being substantially incomplete, leaving a final sample of 452 respondents (229 female, 51%; 223 male, 49%). Participation was voluntary, and neither the identities of respondents nor their business schools are disclosed in this manuscript.

Measure

A structured questionnaire captured responses on a five-point Likert scale ranging from "very much unlike me" to "very much like me." It comprised 24 items (see Appendix) corresponding to the 21st CLC strengths, grouped under the six virtues of wisdom, courage, humanity, justice, temperance, and transcendence. These strengths and virtues, proposed by Advani and Mergenthaler (2024), are rooted in Peterson and Seligman's (2004) VIA Classification of Character Strengths and Virtues. Two leadership experts reviewed the instrument, and their feedback led to the revision of six items to improve clarity.

Internal consistency, assessed with IBM SPSS version 24, was strong (α = 0.91), comfortably above the 0.70 threshold conventionally used in social science research (George & Mallery, 2003), supporting the instrument's suitability for measuring 21st CLC strengths in this sample.

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Procedure for Data Analysis

Mean values were calculated for each virtue and character strength. A one-sample t-test assessed whether each mean significantly exceeded the benchmark score of 4, corresponding to the "Like me" response option and interpreted as respondents perceiving the strength as descriptive of themselves. Independent-samples t-tests compared male and female respondents on each virtue and strength, and Cohen's d was calculated to gauge the practical significance of observed differences.

ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

Table 2: One-Sample t-Test Results for the Six Virtues of 21st CLC Strengths

Virtue	Mean	SD	Diff. (Mean − 4)	t	p Value	Cohen's d
Transcendence (TR)	4.11	0.76	0.11	2.99	0.00*	0.14
Humanity (H)	3.98	0.86	−0.02	−0.38	0.70	−0.02
Justice (J)	3.98	0.80	−0.02	−0.61	0.54	−0.03
Temperance (T)	3.97	0.70	−0.03	−0.96	0.34	−0.04
Wisdom (W)	3.90	0.79	−0.10	−2.67	0.01*	−0.13
Courage (C)	3.90	0.75	−0.10	−2.88	0.00*	−0.14

Table 2 reports the one-sample t-test results for the six 21st CLC virtues. Three virtues — Humanity, Justice, and Temperance — did not differ significantly from the benchmark score of 4 ($p > .05$), indicating they are present at an acceptable level.

The remaining three virtues — Transcendence, Wisdom, and Courage — differed significantly from the benchmark: Transcendence sat significantly above it, while Wisdom and Courage sat significantly below it. All six effect sizes were small or smaller than typical by Cohen's (1998) criterion (as applied by Morgan et al., 2011) ($|d| < 0.20$), suggesting these gaps, while statistically real, would not be strongly apparent in day-to-day interactions.

Table 3: One-Sample t-Test Results for 21st CLC Strengths

21CL Character Strength Indicator	Mean	SD	Diff. (Mean − 4)	t	p Value	Cohen's d
Purpose-driven Practices (TR5)	4.30	0.72	0.30	8.78	0.00*	0.41**
Performance Recognition (TR1)	4.18	0.96	0.18	4.00	0.00*	0.19
Appreciation (TR2)	4.13	0.92	0.13	3.07	0.00*	0.14
Collaboration (J1)	4.11	0.98	0.11	2.39	0.02*	0.11
Positive Work Environment (TR4)	4.10	1.01	0.10	2.01	0.05	0.09
Network Building (H1)	4.06	1.02	0.06	1.34	0.18	0.06
Self-management (T4)	4.05	0.94	0.05	1.21	0.23	0.06
Confident Advocacy (C1)	4.02	1.02	0.00	0.00	1.00	0.00
Optimism (TR3)	4.02	1.02	0.02	0.42	0.68	0.02
Continuous Learning (W4)	4.01	1.06	0.01	0.27	0.79	0.01
Cultural Awareness (H3)	4.01	1.02	0.01	0.14	0.89	0.01

Self-awareness (T2)	3.98	0.93	−0.02	−0.56	0.58	−0.03
Trustworthiness (C3)	3.97	1.04	−0.03	−0.68	0.50	−0.03
Ethical Practice (J2)	3.96	1.00	−0.04	−0.94	0.35	−0.04
Forgiveness (T1)	3.95	1.00	−0.05	−1.08	0.28	−0.05
Exploration (W2)	3.92	1.01	−0.08	−1.77	0.08	−0.08
Judicious Decision-making (T3)	3.90	0.99	−0.10	−2.22	0.03*	−0.10
Decision-making (W3)	3.89	1.01	−0.11	−2.32	0.02*	−0.11
Supportive Behavior (H2)	3.88	1.09	−0.12	−2.28	0.02*	−0.11
Positive Engagement (C4)	3.88	1.03	−0.12	−2.46	0.01*	−0.12
Innovation (W1)	3.87	1.19	−0.13	−2.26	0.02*	−0.11
Team Leadership (J3)	3.87	1.00	−0.13	−2.88	0.00*	−0.14
Strategic Visioning (W5)	3.82	1.02	−0.18	−3.72	0.00*	−0.18
Results Orientation (C2)	3.75	1.07	−0.25	−5.00	0.00*	−0.24**

Twelve indicators (TR5, TR1, TR2, J1, T3, W3, H2, C4, W1, J3, W5, C2) differed significantly from the benchmark. Four of these — TR5, TR1, TR2, and J1 — were significantly above it; the remaining eight sat significantly below. Effect sizes were small across the board except for TR5 and Results Orientation (C2), whose small-to-medium effects suggest these two strengths, in particular, would be noticeable in everyday interactions — Purpose-driven Practices as a relative strength, and Results Orientation as a relative gap.

Gender Comparisons

Table 4: Comparison of the Mean Scores of the Six Virtues of 21st CLC Strengths by Gender

Virtue	Male Mean	Male SD	Female Mean	Female SD	Mean Diff.	F	T	p value
Wisdom (W)	3.82	0.81	3.98	0.76	−0.17	0.35	−2.27	0.02*
Courage (C)	3.81	0.74	3.98	0.75	−0.17	0.47	−2.41	0.02*
Humanity (H)	3.89	0.84	4.07	0.86	−0.18	0.85	−2.24	0.03*
Justice (J)	3.87	0.82	4.08	0.77	−0.20	0.04	−2.71	0.01*
Temperance (T)	3.91	0.74	4.03	0.65	−0.12	1.62	−1.85	0.07
Transcendence (TR)	4.04	0.79	4.18	0.74	−0.14	0.01	−1.96	0.06

Table 4 compares the six virtues by gender. Female respondents scored numerically higher than male respondents on all six virtues, with the difference reaching statistical significance for Wisdom, Courage, Humanity, and Justice.

Table 5: Level of 21st CLC Strengths by Gender

21CL Character Strength Indicator	Male Mean	Male SD	Female Mean	Female SD	Mean Diff.	F	T	p value
Decision-making (W3)	3.75	1.06	4.02	0.95	−0.27	7.25**	−2.84	0.01*
Forgiveness (T1)	3.82	1.03	4.08	0.96	−0.26	0.41	−2.81	0.01*

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Collaboration (J1)	3.99	1.02	4.23	0.94	−0.24	0.25	−2.65	0.01*
Performance Recognition (TR1)	4.06	1.00	4.30	0.91	−0.24	0.20	−2.68	0.01*
Results Orientation (C2)	3.62	1.11	3.87	1.02	−0.26	2.23	−2.56	0.01*
Judicious Decision-making (T3)	3.77	1.08	4.01	0.89	−0.24	10.5**	−2.55	0.01*
Confident Advocacy (C1)	3.88	1.02	4.12	1.01	−0.24	0.54	−2.51	0.01*
Supportive Behavior (H2)	3.76	1.10	4.00	1.07	−0.25	2.86	−2.42	0.02*
Ethical Practice (J2)	3.85	1.02	4.06	0.98	−0.21	0.00	−2.19	0.03*
Trustworthiness (C3)	3.86	1.09	4.07	0.99	−0.21	1.83	−2.14	0.03*
Continuous Learning (W4)	3.92	1.08	4.10	1.03	−0.18	0.70	−1.78	0.08
Cultural Awareness (H3)	3.92	1.03	4.09	1.01	−0.16	0.02	−1.71	0.09
Team Leadership (J3)	3.78	1.02	3.94	0.97	−0.16	0.43	−1.71	0.09
Strategic Visioning (W5)	3.74	1.02	3.90	1.02	−0.16	0.64	−1.68	0.09
Positive Work Environment (TR4)	4.02	1.03	4.17	0.98	−0.15	0.19	−1.60	0.11
Innovation (W1)	3.79	1.20	3.95	1.18	−0.16	0.39	−1.42	0.16
Network Building (H1)	4.00	1.04	4.13	0.99	−0.13	1.22	−1.32	0.19
Self-management (T4)	4.11	0.95	4.00	0.93	0.11	0.25	1.23	0.22
Optimism (TR3)	3.96	1.06	4.07	0.98	−0.11	0.46	−1.15	0.25
Self-awareness (T2)	3.93	0.93	4.02	0.93	−0.09	0.07	−1.07	0.29
Exploration (W2)	3.87	1.04	3.96	0.98	−0.09	1.25	−0.96	0.34
Appreciation (TR2)	4.10	0.92	4.16	0.92	−0.06	1.14	−0.66	0.51
Positive Engagement (C4)	3.90	0.99	3.87	1.07	0.03	4.66	0.32	0.75
Purpose-driven Practices (TR5)	4.31	0.72	4.29	0.71	0.02	0.09	0.29	0.78

Table 5 extends the comparison to the 24 individual strengths. Female respondents scored higher on every indicator except Self-management (T4), Positive Engagement (C4), and Purpose-driven Practices (TR5), where male means were marginally higher. Ten of these differences were statistically significant: Decision-making (W3), Forgiveness (T1), Collaboration (J1), Performance Recognition (TR1), Results Orientation (C2), Judicious Decision-making (T3), Confident Advocacy (C1), Supportive Behavior (H2), Ethical Practice (J2), and Trustworthiness (C3). The remaining fourteen indicators did not differ significantly by gender.

Discussion

The finding that Transcendence stood out as the most developed virtue, while Wisdom and Courage lagged behind, is consistent with the broader pattern in the positive-psychology literature that individuals tend to unevenly express character strengths, favoring those tied to meaning, gratitude, and appreciation over strengths

that require deliberation, risk-taking, or assertiveness (Peterson & Park, 2009; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Purpose-driven Practices standing out as the single strongest individual strength dovetails with recent qualitative evidence that Gen-Z places a high premium on finding meaning and purpose in their work, sometimes ahead of compensation or status (Yılmaz et al., 2024). Conversely, the relatively low scores for Strategic Visioning, Team Leadership, Innovation, and Results Orientation suggest that this cohort — still largely without direct leadership experience — has not yet had the opportunity to practice the more outward-facing, execution-oriented dimensions of leadership, even where the underlying dispositions for Transcendence-related virtues are already well formed.

The gender pattern found here — female students scoring higher across all six virtues and 21 of 24 individual strengths, with ten strengths differing significantly — broadly echoes prior character-strengths research, although the specific strengths involved differ somewhat from what earlier studies have reported. Heintz, Kramm, and Ruch's (2019) meta-analysis of gender differences across the 24 VIA strengths found that females tend to score higher on strengths tied to relational warmth (appreciation of beauty and excellence, kindness, love, gratitude), but concluded that most gender differences are small and that men and women are, on the whole, more alike than different in their character strengths. The present findings extend this picture into a leadership-specific instrument and a Pakistani business-student sample: the significant female advantage on strengths such as Collaboration, Ethical Practice, Trustworthiness, and Supportive Behavior suggests that, at least within this cohort, female students may be entering the workforce with a head start on the relational and integrity-based dimensions of leadership character, even as absolute effect sizes remain modest.

These patterns should be read against Pakistan's specific socio-cultural backdrop. Gen-Z students in Lahore are navigating a rapidly digitizing, globally connected economy while still operating within comparatively traditional gender-role expectations, and it is plausible that these expectations shape which character strengths male and female students have had more or less occasion to practice and express prior to entering business school.

CONCLUSION

The objective of this study was to evaluate the characteristics of leadership among twenty-first-century business students of Lahore University of Management and Technology (LUMS) and to compare the leadership characteristics by gender of Gen-Z business students. The most common virtue was considered to be Transcendence, and Wisdom and Courage were relatively undeveloped; Humanity, Justice, and Temperance were at an acceptable level. In the case of female respondents, their scores were higher than those of male respondents for the dimensions of Wisdom, Courage, Humanity and Justice. On the individual strengths level, there were three main practices – Purpose-driven Practices, Performance Recognition and Appreciation – and seven comparatively underdeveloped practices – Exploration, Judicious Decision-making, Supportive Behavior, Positive Engagement, Innovation, Team Leadership and Strategic Visioning. Once again, female respondents indicated higher levels than males for the following items: Decision-making, Forgiveness, Collaboration, Performance Recognition, Results Orientation, Judicious Decision-

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making, Confident Advocacy, Supportive Behavior, Ethical Practice, and Trustworthiness.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Business schools need to integrate formally, with an eye to the Wisdom and Courage virtues, case-based decision-making exercises, debate and advocacy training, and mentored risk-taking opportunities, particularly where Gen-Z students' scores currently do not meet the benchmark.

2. Curricula should draw on the students' prior strength in Transcendence-related virtues (purpose, gratitude, appreciation), but it would be important to make the explicit connection between the students' prior strength in those virtues and a sense of purpose in the new coursework and in the project work they are doing.

3. 3. Leadership-development programs should be gendered, with additional support given to male students, where evidence suggests, in the strengths that have the greatest gender disparity (Decision making, Forgiveness, Collaboration, Supportive Behavior, and related indicators).

4. Career-services and student-leadership offices should provide additional opportunities for students in final year to develop Strategic Visioning, Team Leadership and Innovation in low-stakes environments, such as student organizations or capstone projects or internships, prior to applying these skills in the workplace.

5. Periodic re-administration of a 21st CLC-style instrument should be considered in business schools to assess for evidence of change over time in the effects of character-development interventions.

LIMITATIONS

There are a number of limitations in this study. First, the sample was limited to final-year undergraduate business students from Lahore, which restricts the generalizability of the results to other cities, academic levels and disciplines. Second, the cross-sectional approach only produces a snapshot of character strengths at one time and is unable to offer insights into the growth or change of those strengths as students enter the workforce. Third, the data are self-reported so that social-desirability bias may have occurred, especially with socially valued traits, such as the character strengths, being studied. Fourth, the study only captured self-perceptions of students' characteristics, rather than the way these characteristics are perceived or practiced, or not, by other people (peers, teachers, employers), as this would provide more understanding into self-perceptions as they play out in other behaviors observed by others.

SIGNIFICANCE

The current study adds to the scanty empirical character-based leadership studies in Pakistan, paving the way to the positive-psychology, strengths-based paradigm of the leadership literature. The business-education application of the 21st CLC model provides a foundation for business schools, ORIC-like research and

innovation offices, curriculum developers, and corporate recruiters to create interventions for character development that are specific to the needs of the business school environment. The gender-specific results, in particular, help institutions to make decisions about where to invest their leadership-development efforts, instead of assuming Gen Z is a homogenous group.

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APPENDIX

21st-Century Leadership Character Strength Indicators and Questionnaire Items

Strength Indicator	Questionnaire Item
1. Innovation (W1)	I use creative ideas to solve academic problems.
2. Exploration (W2)	I enjoy exploring new ideas.
3. Decision-making (W3)	I think carefully before making decisions.
4. Continuous Learning (W4)	I enjoy learning new skills.
5. Strategic Visioning (W5)	I consider different viewpoints before making decisions.
6. Confident Advocacy (C1)	I speak up confidently when a difficult issue needs attention.
7. Results Orientation (C2)	I continue working toward my goals when I face difficulties.
8. Trustworthiness (C3)	I communicate honestly with others.
9. Positive Engagement (C4)	I approach my work with energy and enthusiasm.
10. Network Building (H1)	I build positive relationships with others.
11. Supportive Behavior (H2)	I support others when they need help.
12. Cultural Awareness (H3)	I understand how other people feel.
13. Collaboration (J1)	I contribute actively when working in a team.
14. Ethical Practice (J2)	I treat all team members fairly.
15. Team Leadership (J3)	I help my group achieve its goals.
16. Forgiveness (T1)	I give others another chance after they make a mistake.
17. Self-awareness (T2)	I recognize my own limitations.
18. Judicious Decision-making (T3)	I think carefully before taking action.
19. Self-management (T4)	I manage my emotions in difficult situations.
20. Performance Recognition (TR1)	I value excellent work.
21. Appreciation (TR2)	I express appreciation for others' contributions.
22. Optimism (TR3)	I expect positive outcomes in the future.
23. Positive Work Environment (TR4)	I use humor to create a positive atmosphere.
24. Purpose-driven Practices (TR5)	I find a sense of purpose in my academic journey.