How Do University Students Experience Using Photos to Self-Identify Their Character Strengths? A Thematic Analysis

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The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the demand for mental and emotional well-being support. As a result of the pandemic and the prevailing economic climate, individuals and businesses in the UK have been 'taking stock'. Positive Psychology Interventions (PPIs) offer the potential to meet these needs through strength-based approaches that demonstrate a variety of benefits. One such benefit is the use of photographs to transform the narratives that individuals assign to their experiences. This intervention may have a range of advantages, including a positive impact on well-being. However, there is relatively little research into the use of photos as a potential tool for self-identifying strengths. To gain an understanding of the lived experience of using photos to elicit strengths, nine students studying psychology at a UK university were recruited. The participants undertook an intervention based on that used by Steger et al. (2014) in their pilot study. Each participant was asked to take 9-12 pictures of things that were meaningful to them over one week. Semi-structured interviews were used for data collection, and reflexive thematic analysis was undertaken to analyses the data. Four themes were identified: Experiencing strengths, Feeling uplifted, Being reflective, and Looking to the future. It was found that the participants experienced the intervention as profound and enriching. This study provides valuable insights into the experience of this PPI and may have implications for positive psychology practitioners and coaches.

Keywords: Character strengths, meaning, photographs, thematic analysis

The pursuit of happiness can be traced back to early human civilizations, where its understanding was deeply intertwined with philosophical and theological thought (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Recent years have witnessed a resurgence of this through the scientific study and practice of Positive Psychology (Lomas et al., 2019), which "aims to understand, test, discover and promote the factors that allow individuals and communities to thrive" (Boniwell & Tunariu, 2019, p. 2). Researchers within the field seek to study the factors which help people to achieve well-being within their lives.

Strengths is one of the categories of PPIs with a range of studies demonstrating its positive impact on well-being, including that more recently of Azanedo (2021) and Green (2021). Strengths are "defined as a natural capacity for behaving, thinking, or feeling in a way that allows optimal functioning and performance in the pursuit of valued outcomes" (Linley & Harrington, 2006, p. 88). Research has identified 24 core character strengths that have consistently proven to apply to all people across time and culture (Peterson &

Seligman, 2004). The ability to recognise and express these character strengths through strengths-based interventions can lead to an increase in well-being (Seligman et al, 2005). This study aims to explore the self-identification of strengths. It will build on research by Teti et al. (2015) who found strengths that had manifested through photo narratives had a transformative power in inspiring positive change. The research question for this paper is: How do university students experience using photos to self-identify their character strengths?

Strengths

Strengths-based interventions can be applied as a stand-alone approach or in conjunction with other PPIs. Brouzos et al. (2021) conducted a study to examine the effectiveness of online PPIs for groups during the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings revealed that by developing participants' strengths and resilience, their Subjective Well-Being (SWB) increased, evidenced by a rise in positive emotions and a decrease in negative emotions, making it an effective coping strategy. Hausler et al. (2017) highlighted the distinctions between SWB and Psychological Well-Being (PWB), asserting that different character strengths are associated with different areas of SWB and PWB, thus establishing the need for targeted approaches when using strengths-based interventions. However, the emphasis on increasing positive emotions to build resilience does not account for a psychoanalytic perspective, which argues that negative events can also influence strengths, leading to positive changes (Craib,

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1994).

Of further interest is Zarecky's (2014) research which used a strengths-based coaching intervention aimed to help six military personnel, transition into civilian life. The first part of the study involved a strengths card intervention which enabled participants to select a card representing the strength they identified with, this enabled them to answer questions during a coaching session. The second part of the study involved another coaching session which used this self-awareness to discuss their strengths, interests and passions, in relation to the identification of potential careers. A recent study that further validates Zarecky's (2014) findings was undertaken by Fouracres and van Nieuwerburgh (2020), who explored the experiences of participants' self-identification of their strengths through coaching. The study demonstrated that the opportunity for clients to self-elicit strengths can be a particularly insightful and powerful process. The findings suggested that one of the many benefits of using strengths was that it made participants more self-aware and enabled them to explore ways to use them in the future.

Overall, the studies discussed above demonstrate the benefits of using strengths-based approaches as a PPI and within coaching. They also highlight the dominant use of strengths cards in eliciting strengths and, therefore, demonstrate the gap in research into strengths when incorporating tools such as photographs. This literature review will now explore the use of photographs to further explore the potential gap of research within this area.

Photographs

Early studies by Lyubomirsky et al. (2005) assert that cognitive and behavioural methods, including the use of engaging and enjoyable photographs, can increase happiness. However, while the potential benefits of photography seem almost inevitable (Kurtz, 2015), it should be noted that the tool can be counterproductive, as participants may become distracted by the camera, as demonstrated by Henkel (2013).

One of the most renowned studies in developing photography interventions was conducted by Steger et al. (2013) and Steger et al. (2014), followed shortly by Teti et al. (2015), who used photo narratives to explore the experiences of women living with HIV. The study found that the use of photographs allowed them to recognise their strengths and to see a different version of themselves. This opportunity of reflection enabled the women to go on to make choices that facilitated positive health changes. It also allowed participants to be creative and develop a deeper understanding of themselves.

A recent and arguably more geographically relevant study of positive psychology was undertaken by Lee et al. (2021) in the United Kingdom. The 'SnaAppy' application was developed to investigate the use of smartphone photography on well-being. The study found a significant and positive link between mood and positive and negative affect. This is important as it shows the potential positive effect photographs can have and the value of exploring this research further.

More pertinent to this current research is Donaldson-Wright and Heffron's (2020) study exploring the use of photographs within the coaching process, which found that the process was enhanced through its use. In addition, the coachees found it to be a positive process which enabled them to develop mindful self-awareness. The current study proposes extending research which establishes the advantages of using photography as a resource. Overall, the research within this review has illustrated the individual benefits of using strengths and photos but has also demonstrated that there is a gap in our knowledge about combining the two.

Method

This is a qualitative methodological design which adopts a Constructionist approach. This will allow the exploration of emerging themes based on the participants' subjective experience. It will do so by collecting and analyzing data obtained through the use of their words. The qualitative approach was therefore more appropriate than a quantitative one in that it would allow for the generation of rich data from a small selection of participants allowing the researcher to identify emerging patterns (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic Analysis, in particular the approach known as Reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2020) was therefore identified as an appropriate method of analyzing the data. This would employ an inductive, or 'bottom-up' approach which does not consist of any preconceived theories. Importantly, this study finds Reflexive Thematic Analysis to be an appropriate method of qualitative analysis that can be used to address the research question 'What is the experience of university students using photos to self-identify their Character strengths?'

Participants

A homogeneous participant sample of nine students studying psychology at a UK university was recruited, as shown in Table 1. The COVID-19 Pandemic had proven difficult to recruit participants, so this sample was identified due to their accessibility from within the university (Edwards & Holland, 2013). An advertisement was used with students through face-to-face interaction, and online Teams groups for the MSc Applied Positive Psychology and Coaching Psychology program. Students expressing an interest in participating were provided with the participant information letter and consent form for signing. In addition, as the study involved self-identifying Character Strengths, participants were verbally briefed about and sent details of the VIA Strengths Framework (VIA Character Strengths Survey & Character Reports, 2022). This aimed to provide participants with guidance around some of the strengths they could draw on later, for the semi-structured interviews. No monetary or other award was offered for participation in the study.

The Intervention

Participants were asked to take between 9 and 12 pictures of things that were meaningful to them or which they found a connection with. They were asked to do this on their phones over a week. This process adopted the one undertaken by Steger et al. (2014). In advance of the interview, participants were asked to shortlist five photographs they felt particularly connected to.

Data Collection

The data was collected through semi-structured interviews which were conducted online. The interview questions allowed participants to talk about their experience of taking photographs;

Table 1. Participants

Participant Code	Age	Gender	Ethnicity	Home Identified
Participant 1	26-40	Female	White	Germany
Participant 2	Over 40	Female	Mixed Ethnicity	Brazil
Participant 3	Over 40	Female	White	UK
Participant 4	18-25	Female	White other	UK
Participant 5	Over 40	Female	White British	UK
Participant 6	18-25	Female	White Other	Prefer not to say
Participant 7	26-40	Male	White	Romania
Participant 8	Over 40	Female	White British	Spain
Participant 9	26-40	Female	Mixed Race	UK

their thoughts and feelings about the strengths they identified; their perceived benefit of the strengths, and their overall experience of the process– from taking the photographs to discussing their strengths in the interview. The interviewer invited the participants to expand on their answers where appropriate.

Data Analysis

The researcher analyzed the data using the six-stage process of reflexive thematic analysis as outlined by Braun & Clarke (2006). Guidelines provided by Braun and Clarke's (2006) '15-point checklist for good thematic analyses were all considered to ensure the quality of the analysis, particularly with respect to reliability and validity. Despite this however, it must be acknowledged that "qualitative research does not assume the 'same' accounts will be generated, every time, by any researcher" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 20). Ultimately, the essence of the study is based on the researcher's subjectivity and sense of meaning; it is not formulaic (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This was done manually to allow the researcher to develop a further understanding of the data, in a way that the NVIVIO Software would not enable. A manual process was therefore used to organize the data through Microsoft Word which included opening up new documents for each of the phases. Different font colors were also allocated to each of the nine participants to differentiate between the transcripts. Phase 1 involved the researcher reading all the transcripts and familiarizing herself with the data. This also included taking notes and listing any ideas that were coming up. Phase 2 then involved developing the initial codes which related to key segments of data and this was done for all transcripts. All potentially relevant and interesting data was included at this point. Furthermore, the researcher manually highlighted the names of all the identified strengths, thoughts and feelings of the participants and then recorded these into a table as they may offer further insight into the data obtained. Phase 3 involved grouping all the codes or headings, into potentially emerging themes and sub-themes. This involved manually copying over the extracts for each of the participants under the same headings. Phase 4 involved reviewing the themes and condensing them further and more succinctly in relation to any relevance or overlap and removing any extracts which were inconsistent with the themes. This phase also involved re-reading all the data to make sure everything came together in relation to the themes and that everything relevant was included. The themes were then finalized during Phase 5, along with their sub-themes and relevant extracts. Phase 6 involved illustrating them in the results section of this paper (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Reflexivity

The considerations undertaken to avoid bias within the study were done so from the onset. The researcher undertook Reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2020) which works flexibly with a range of epistemological and ontological positions (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and was cautious not to omit any potentially relevant extracts during the initial phases of thematic analysis in a bid to not prematurely rule out prospective areas of interest and invalidate the participants' experience. In addition, the researcher ensured they approached people from a range of backgrounds for participation in the study, irrespective of factors such as race, gender and disability. A reflective journal was kept and regular meetings took place with the supervisor to ensure the integrity of the work being undertaken.

Ethics

Ethical Approval was granted by the University of East London's, School of Psychology Research Ethics Committee. The British Psychological Society's Code of Ethics and Conduct (2021) was also adhered to throughout the course of the study. All data was anonymized to protect participants' identity and the data was saved on the researcher's password-protected university OneDrive account. Regular supervision also provided the opportunity to ensure work was being undertaken following ethical standards (Hawkins & Smith, 2013).

Results

The findings have been organized in accordance with the most compelling themes that have arisen through the participants' experiences. The section below will look at the 4 main themes and their sub-themes.

Theme 1: Experiencing Strengths

A range of strengths were identified in the process. The nine participants mentioned strengths a total of 433 times. Love was the most mentioned strength, closely followed by gratitude. The sub-themes consist of the character strengths expressed by the participants. This included gratitude, hope, perspective and the virtue of transcendence.

Gratitude

All but one participant mentioned gratitude as they delved into their experiences, highlighting their significance in their reflections. Notably, while they were conscious of aspects such as family, the opportunity to reflect allowed them to develop a connection with a range of other aspects they were grateful for. Participant 6 contemplated on what they felt was a tough time and recognized the value in being able to have the opportunity to reflect on it "I've never really looked back on it properly. And now you're giving me that chance. So, first of all, I'm grateful for the space". Participant 5 also expressed gratitude for the opportunity to be part of the research, "I'm grateful for the exercise as well. Actually, cause I wouldn't necessarily have taken a picture of them cuddled up on the sofa like that without the photograph intervention".

Table 1. Themes and sub-themes

Themes	Sub-themes
1. Experiencing strengths/virtue	Gratitude, Hope, Perspective, Transcendence
2. Feeling uplifted	Positive Emotions, Therapeutic
3. Being reflective	Metaphor for life, Recognition of personal growth
4. Looking to the future	Future Actions, Utilizing strengths

Hope

Many of the participants were also able to derive a sense of hope from the photos. Participant 5 was able to recognise its prevalence, even though she had originally deemed hope as one of her lesser strengths. The intervention provided an opportunity to gain further insight into one's strengths "It feels a hopeful picture and then that's one of my lesser strengths, actually". Participant 6 was also able to derive a great sense of conviction from a photo that conveyed hope, as it reaffirmed their values "There's hope out there for…when people are despondent and I think that's what I stand for. I stand for hope". This provided the participant with a sense of motivation. Hope was also related to a sense of optimism "There's something about hope…you know that pigeon is still hopeful that it's getting food".

Another character strength that hope was associated with was perseverance as demonstrated in the example of Participant 9 "Reminding myself I need to trust in myself…to persevere I guess like. Yeah, it's perseverance and hope come to mind." This quote demonstrates that the ability to motivate oneself to move forward also requires hope.

Perspective

This strength gave participants the experience of gaining new perspectives in the way they look at things. It enabled Participant 3 to reconcile themselves to consider opposing views that very much differed from their own, even when it went against their core belief system. The 'space' to reflect was enabling them to develop an understanding of alternative ways of doing things. It also enabled Participant 5 to gain a sense of clarification "So that was another thing about the photographs. It helped me realize that this is home and I feel at home here".

Transcendence

Transcendence is one of the virtues that encompasses the strength of gratitude and hope on the VIA Strengths Framework. These examples represent the elevated states that were being experienced during the self-identification of strengths with the use of photos. Participant 1 said, "Yeah I can, I can really get lost in it…. I find it quite hypnotic". They also went on to comment on how insightful it was to describe them. Participant 2 also began to describe the experience of 'being reflective' on the photos as an experience that was very captivating and connected with a range of senses.

Participant 2 stated, "It becomes almost the sensory experience looking at these not just in the sense of saying it…I can almost feel them and smell them because they're so part of me and this sun shining on us, and it's all very kind of symbolic".

This experience of being captivated by the pictures was echoed by Participant 5 "Yeah, I was just thinking…the colors are so beautiful…I just love to dive into them…It almost looks like you could swim in the sky actually". This experience enabled the participants to become further immersed in the intervention.

Theme 2: Feeling Uplifted

The participants' experience in using photos to self-identify strengths included the positive impact it had on their mental and emotional well-being.

Positive emotions

Participants found that the experience of talking about the photos whilst self-identifying strengths led to a heightened sense of positive emotions. This is demonstrated in the example of Participant 1, who said, "The sun is shining in this picture… I would jump to this moment and just relive it again because I enjoy these situations so much,' and Participant 5, stated, "It just makes me smile when I see it". These reflections enabled the participants to experience great joy and enhance their subjective well-being. The example of Participant 9—"Just by looking at it now, it brings back memories; it was just so much fun" also demonstrates the potential for photographs to have a lasting positive effect, even when revisited at a later time.

This is also demonstrated in a more somber context, as illustrated by Participant 8, who reflected on their late father: "When I look at the picture, I think of the love I have for my dad and the love he had for me, and the kindness that immediately makes me feel happiness, even though he's not here".

Therapeutic

There was a therapeutic impact on the participants regarding how they felt while discussing the photos and self-identifying their strengths, as demonstrated by Participant 4, who said, "Being reflective on them has actually been a really nice task to do. It feels very therapeutic".

Some of the photos enabled the participants to elicit feelings that helped them feel calm and relaxed. Participant 5 commented, "I'm just thinking about how the colors of the sky reflected in the sea are really calming. It's got real calm energy to it... it's a very relaxing photograph; I think it makes me happy". This quote also demonstrates how these feelings contributed to the participant's sense of happiness.

The experience of undertaking this research provided participants with an opportunity for deeper reflection, which was

very uplifting for them. Participant 5 remarked, "I've actually taken the moment to go out for a walk, go to the pier, and take a photograph of it. I think it's just a really nice way of celebrating the daily miracle of the sunset and the sky changing".

Theme 3: Being reflective

The process of identifying strengths through photos enabled the participants to engage in reflection, allowing certain experiences to occur.

Metaphor for life

Some participants reflected on their journeys through the metaphor of the pictures they described, enabling them to connect these reflections to their strengths. For example, Participant 3 was describing their photograph of a tree "nurturing myself from the bottom, from the root's foundations. Umm, something that I've been working on for, like a really long time… the tree represents the roots, represent me and the tree itself, the branches".

Participant 8 also related their strengths to the metaphor in their picture, which depicted a mountain with a road leading to it. "You never quite know where the road's going. It's winding, there are loads of opportunities and you've got to…enjoy the journey as much as you have to enjoy the destination, so that's what that picture says to me, and that's why I love it". The picture enabled them to obtain a sense of meaning that related to their experience and cemented their understanding of it.

Participant 9 also reflected on the metaphor in her picture, which depicted her partner on his bike on a bridge extending into the distance. She compared this imagery to the journey of their relationship "…because you can't see over the horizon and you don't know where we're going to go and it's like the beginning of a journey together". The picture elicited a profound sense of reverence for the relationship, cultivating feelings of joy and optimism.

Recognition of personal growth

The participants reflected on their personal growth while viewing the photos to self-identify their strengths. This process reminded Participant 3 of their strengths in personal growth "…it makes me think about again just how brave I've been...particularly over the last couple of years…I think I've been really brave to do that". Participant 3 gained great relief in acknowledging that they had learnt to love themselves and no longer felt the need to be perfect. Participant 5 also acknowledged how far they had come through battling a lot of fear. This enabled them to become competent swimmers and use the photo to discuss their progress compared to last year.

Theme 4: Looking to The Future

The participants' experiences enabled them to develop an understanding of what they would like to pursue in the future.

Future actions

As they reflected, participants also began to identify actions they would like to undertake in the future. Participant 2 had developed a profound sense of gratitude towards their bike "I would like to say that to my bike that I'd like to look after even more. Get it painted, just look after it and give it some love and which I haven't done". This affirmed their desire to honor it as they look to the future.

"Participant 3 was also able to establish what she wanted to do, looking to the future, and how she was going to achieve it "…a

representation of who I am which is wanting to help others. Build their, grow their foundations. You know from within". This statement affirmed the participants commitment to helping others. Participant 5 also established they needed "to find more meaning and purpose in my life. So that's big. That's a big a big thing for me as well". This statement was a realization and recognition of what they needed to lead a more fulfilling life.

Utilizing strengths

All the participants of this study recognized their character strengths and identified how they could use them in various areas of their lives.

Participant 1 discussed their top character strength of Appreciation of Beauty and Excellence and described how this enabled them to develop resources and materials of a high standard for clients, which enabled them to achieve a great sense of satisfaction. Participant 2 wanted to develop teamwork as they had become accustomed to working alone. Participant 3 had never considered themselves as creative but the identification of this strength provided a new path of learning. Participant 4 had never considered themselves in respect of love of learning and perseverance and was hopeful about using these strengths in the future. Participant 5 also wanted to develop their lesser strength of zest and perseverance. Participant 6 wished to develop self-regulation in order to navigate life more effectively. Participant 7 wanted to become braver and not let fear influence their decisions. Participant 8 wanted to develop their signature strengths and Participant 9 wanted to draw on gratitude to get through tough times and use humor to connect with people.

Discussion

The experience of using photos to self-identify strengths was profound for the participants in this study. It enabled them to recognize their strengths and supported them in considering how to utilize them in their lives. By taking photographs of meaningful objects or scenes they connected with, participants created a rich experience that allowed them to identify their strengths. They commented on how powerful the experience was, especially in its ability to evoke emotion and provide clarity. Participants appreciated this experience, as it offered them greater understanding and insight into themselves. These findings support earlier studies utilizing strengths-based cards such as that done by Zackery (2014) and Fouracres & van Nieuwerburgh (2020). In relation to the use of photos, there were similarities between the findings of this study and the research of Teti et al. (2015). Participants in this study were able to develop a mindful state of self-awareness, echoing the findings of Donaldson-Wright and Heffron (2020).

A deeper understanding of the participants' ability to self-identify their strengths can be seen in relation to other experiences that emerged during the process, as reflected in the themes. The first theme related to Experiencing Strengths. Love was the most identified strength by all the participants which was followed by gratitude, appreciation of beauty and excellence, hope and perseverance. However, what was particularly surprising were the strengths verbally expressed during the experience, which included gratitude, hope, perspective, and the virtue of transcendence. Participants demonstrated gratitude both while reflecting on their experiences and for the opportunity to participate in this study.

Interestingly, participants were also able to elicit a sense of hope from the pictures and were surprised because it had been a 'lesser' strength. Hope also enabled them to derive a sense of conviction and reaffirm their values. In addition, they were able to see the 'good' or 'positive' in pictures that may have not been otherwise pleasant to look at. One example relates to what Participant 8 referring to a picture of a pigeon;

"It's the scaggiest looking pigeon you will ever get… that pigeon is still hopeful that it's getting food and it's not the best-looking pigeon. It's not the one that everyone is gonna love… there is something very honest about the way it looks is just like this is me take me take me as I am and I think that I probably relate to that" (Participant 8). Hope here relates to a sense of optimism and it also demonstrates the ability for people to remain positive in situations or instances perceived to be negative.

The virtue of transcendence captures the character strength of gratitude, hope and appreciation of beauty and excellence. It was interesting to note that the participants were demonstrating elevated or transcendental states whilst discussing the photos. The examples include participants saying, "I find it quite hypnotic", "I can almost feel them and smell them…it's all very kind of symbolic" and "…the colors are so beautiful…I just love to dive into them…it almost looks like you could swim in the sky actually". The ability to be captivated and immersed by a picture could be considered as experiencing awe and wonder. This is a very powerful process which has the potential to be utilized in interventions aimed at improving well-being. Furthermore, the experience of self-identifying strengths has the potential to develop the participants' perspective, which has allowed them to consider the views of others, even when the views differed drastically from their belief system. These findings support the research of Ruch et al. 2020 which highlighted the contribution of character strengths and the impact they can have.

The second theme relates to participants Feeling uplifted through their experiences of positive emotions. It can be argued that this experience was influential in developing the psychological resources and resilience of participants, which supports Barbara Fredrickson's (2001) Broaden-and-Build Theory. Furthermore, these positive emotions have the potential to support individuals even when reflecting on challenging experiences, such as death. Participant 8 noted, "…when I look at the picture, I think of the love I have for my dad and he had for me and the kindness that immediately makes me feel and the happiness even though he's not here". This supports Victor Frankl's (1985) assertion that people can overcome difficulties by finding meaning in their experiences. Additionally, the participants reported experiencing therapeutic effects, feeling calm and relaxed, as a direct result of the intervention.

The third theme of Being reflective was a particularly interesting process which demonstrated participants' use of metaphors in relation to the images contained within the photographs. This enabled them to gain a sense of clarity and understanding. This illustrates the strength of using metaphors in practice, as is already done in Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (Stoddard & Afari, 2014). In addition, the participants developed an awareness which related to their personal growth. They were able to reflect on how far they had come, and this instilled a sense of joy and pride in them. It can be argued that developing a safe space for the participants or clients is essential to them being able to develop self-awareness. Furthermore, psychoanalytic theory and the work of Winnicott (1961) can be drawn on in relation to the concept of the researcher or practitioner being able to 'hold' the participants. It is proposed that this enhanced the experience of participants, enabling them to feel safe and secure enough to learn.

This process enabled a natural progression to the fourth theme Looking to the Future which comprised a natural inclination of the participants to establish future actions. In addition, the participants found it easy to self-identify their strengths using photos and develop an awareness of how they could use them in various aspects of life in the future. This process consisted of some of the elements required for flow: the fact that the participants were fully focused on what they were doing, there was a loss of self-awareness whilst maintaining control of the activity and the participants found the task to be intrinsically rewarding (Csikszentmihalyi, 1992). The ability to be innately connected to what one is doing in order to achieve goals could also be considered in relation to Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000) and understood in relation to the participants having a natural inclination to identify future actions. In essence, they had found an intrinsic connection with what they were discussing and this appeared to enhance their experience and ability to self-identify their strengths.

Limitations

The VIA Strengths Framework was a useful tool that overall enabled participants to extract relevant character strengths for purposes of this research, by giving them a vocabulary to support the discussion. It was provided as a guide to help participants explore their strengths and participants had the flexibility not to be limited by it. However, it is important to highlight that the framework consists of only 24-character strengths—and this may not have provided the full range of strengths that participants had identified. The participants chose to select the closest strength that represented what they wanted to express. For example, Participant 2 felt that the strength of 'connection' was a more appropriate term but the closest thing to it was 'love' and 'appreciation of beauty and excellence'. In addition, Participant 8 was also not able to draw on 'independence' which was not included in the classifications. This highlights some of the wider concerns of the VIA Strengths Framework (Boniwell, 2006). The classification and definition of strengths are therefore an important consideration when developing research in this area. In addition, the data analysis cannot be considered completely objective or impartial, as it relies on the judgment and perspective of the researcher (Braun & Clarke, 2013).

Secondly, the study was restricted by the range of participants that could be recruited. In the end, the selection of a homogenous sample depended on Psychology students who were accessible and forthcoming. These students share the commonality of being accustomed to self-reflective practice and being more open to pursuing opportunities that have the potential for insight and growth. However, the benefits of using strengths-based interventions have been demonstrated using a range of other participant samples over time. These groups have included military personnel (Zarecky, 2014), women living with HIV (Teti et al., 2015), and professionals in the workplace (Fouracres & van Nieuwerburgh, 2020). These findings underscore the need for continued research in this area,

given the potential benefits it can provide to individuals.

Implications For Future Research and Practice

The study has demonstrated the advantages of using photos to self-identify strengths, as well as the importance of conducting further research on combining and using photographs as a strengths-based intervention. These elements are therefore potentially useful for a range of practitioners including coaches and therapists who would be able to incorporate them into their practice. Furthermore, it further supports the effectiveness of using Positive Psychology Interventions online to facilitate well-being, as was demonstrated by Brouzos et al. (2021). This provides further support for the online use of such interventions, especially in environments where physical accessibility is challenging, and the need for appropriate support is paramount.

The study was able to successfully recruit the nine participants required for a small Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) study (Braun & Clarke, 2013). However, it would be valuable to increase the size of the study, use other samples of participants and make it more representative of gender as this study only consisted of one male participant. This would be important in understanding the validity of the current findings. In addition, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) could be used in order to delve further into the existing understanding of self-identifying strengths through photos.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study shows that the participants' ability to self-identify strengths through photos was enriched by the experience of undertaking the research process. As participants took pictures of things that were meaningful to them, it appears that this may have been important in facilitating the self-identification of strengths, due to the connection participants found with the photos.

Some of the key elements of the experience that were particularly prominent related to the expression of the strengths of gratitude, hope, perspective and the virtue of transcendence. In addition, participants felt uplifted through the increase of positive emotions and the apparent therapeutic effects of the experience. The opportunity for participants to reflect on their experiences allowed them to use metaphors to better understand their journeys and experiences. It also allowed them to acknowledge the progress they had made.

This study has shown the potential of integrating the use of photography in positive psychology interventions. This supports the growing interest in the integration of positive psychology and arts-based interventions. Further exploration of the possibilities and potential of integrating these fields is recommended.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

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