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Character Strengths of Indonesian Secondary Students in the Digital Age

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Abstract: The digital era raises questions about how students' character strengths operate in technology-saturated environments. This study aimed to map character strengths profiles across three Indonesian secondary school types—Islamic (MA), general (SMA), and vocational (SMK)—and to compare these profiles by gender. A sequential explanatory mixed-methods design was used. Quantitative data were collected from 360 students using an adapted VIA Inventory of Strengths questionnaire; qualitative data were gathered through in-depth interviews with nine purposively selected students. Quantitative analyses included descriptive statistics, independent t-tests, effect sizes (Cohen's d) interpreted using Gignac & Szodorai's (2016) guidelines, and thematic analysis. Three main findings emerged. First, Hope and Gratitude were consistently high across all three school types, while Creativity, Perspective, and Leadership were consistently low. Second, gender differences varied by school type: significant differences were found in MA and SMK. Third, qualitative interviews revealed that students with low self-reported creativity still described creative ideas when asked directly. In practice, these findings suggest that school counsellors might supplement questionnaires with open-ended questions. Limitations include non-probability sampling, cross-sectional design, and single-item measures.

Key Words: Character strengths; Secondary school students; Gender differences; Digital era; Mixed methods

INTRODUCTION

School counselors are increasingly facing the challenge of students who spend a lot of time online and have mental health disorders. Several studies using the DASS-21 validate that people in Indonesia are exposed to mental disorders, including students (Natanael, 2026; Ifdil et al., 2022). Other studies have shown that excessive use of social media is associated with mental health issues such as anxiety and depression among adolescents (Yasin et al., 2022). However, most of these studies adopt a deficit-based approach, focusing on what is wrong with students. A strengths-based approach that identifies and develops positive traits can be a more holistic preventive strategy (Lavy, 2020). Yet, for school counselors, without knowing how character strengths function in digital environments, they cannot design effective programmes to help students thrive in both the real world and the digital world. This study addresses this gap by mapping students' character strengths to support mental health and exploring how these strengths are expressed in their daily digital lives.

Character strengths are positive traits that help students think, feel, and act in ways that benefit themselves and others (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). The VIA Classification organises these traits into 24 strengths, such as creativity, kindness, hope, and honesty. For students, research has shown that these strengths support academic engagement, mental health, and good relationships with others (Vuorinen,

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2022; Lavy, 2020). However, the VIA framework was created before digital technology became a central part of daily life. This raises an important question. Do digital environments amplify certain strengths, suppress others, such as reducing creativity when students passively scroll rather than create, or reshape how strengths are expressed? Schools need answers to these questions because students spend more time online than ever before. Without understanding how digital context affects character strengths, counsellors will not know whether to reinforce, protect, or adapt the strengths students bring to online spaces. This study is designed to answer those questions.

To answer them, we need to revisit. The VIA Classification (Peterson & Seligman, 2004) provides a comprehensive framework for understanding character strengths, organising 24 positive traits across six core virtues. While all 24 strengths have been shown to support well-being in general populations (Lavy, 2020), the present study has not examined how digital environments affect them. Do online spaces help these strengths grow, weaken them, or change how they appear? School counselors need answers because they help students navigate both real and digital worlds. This leads us to propose a tentative concept, ‘latent potential’, strengths that students actually have but cannot show because of external barriers such as limited facilities, lack of encouragement, or excessive passive scrolling. Unlike the VIA framework, which focuses on what students report doing, ‘latent potential’ draws attention to what students could do if given the right support. For school counselor, this means low scores on character assessments may not mean “no strength”; they may mean “no opportunity”.

What do existing studies tell us about character strengths in Indonesia? Research consistently shows that spirituality, gratitude, and kindness are among the most prominent strengths reported by Muslim students (Listiyandini & Akmal, 2018; Ramadhani et al., 2021; Henisa et al., 2021). This pattern makes sense in Indonesia’s collectivist and religious culture. However, these studies share three problems that this research aims to address. First, they rely solely on quantitative data. Nearly all studies use questionnaires with closed-ended scales. Students check boxes, but research rarely asks “What does kindness actually look like in your daily life?” or “When do you feel most creative?” We learn the “what” but not the “why” or “how”. Second, they study limited groups. Most participants are university students or from a single school. We do not know whether character strengths differ across Islamic (MA), general (SMA), and vocational (SMK) high schools. School type may matter because each has different routines, rules, and peer cultures. Third, they ignore the digital world. Students today spend 4-6 hours daily on social media. Yet no study asks “Do the same strengths appear online? Do some strengths hide because students scroll passively rather than create?” The digital context changes how strengths might be expressed, suppressed, or reshaped. International studies have explored character strengths in school (Lavy, 2020) and their link to well-being (Brito & Soares, 2023), but these were conducted in Western countries and did not focus on digital environments as a key factor. We know little about how Indonesian students’ character strengths operate across different school types within their digital lives. This study fills that gap by using a mixed-methods design, sampling three school types, and placing digital context at the centre.

We know which character strengths Indonesian students report in questionnaires, but we do not know how those strengths manifest across different school types. We do not know whether boys and girls show different patterns depending on their school environment. Most importantly, we do not know how these strengths operate in students’ digital lives when they scroll through TikTok, chat on WhatsApp, or study online. That is why this study asks three questions: (1) How do character strengths differ across MA, SMA, and SMK? (2) Do gender differences in character strengths look the same or different depending on school type? (3) How do students themselves understand and express their strengths when they are online? To answer these questions, this study combines numbers and stories. This mixed-methods approach allows us to see both general patterns and individual experiences. Our goal is not to “expand” the VIA framework but to offer concrete, contextual insight into how character strengths appear in Indonesian secondary schools and digital spaces, insight that school counselors can actually use. Moreover, this understanding will help counselors not only prevent mental disorders but also build resilience and unlock students’ potential, both in the real world and in the digital world.

METHOD

Participants

This study involved 360 students from three private secondary schools in Banjarnegara, Central Java, representing three educational tracks: Islamic senior high school (MA, $n=120$), general high school (SMA, $n=120$), and vocational senior high school (SMK, $n=120$). The participants were aged 15-19 years ($M = 16.7$, $SD = 1.2$), with 151 males and 209 females. The target population consisted of students attending private secondary schools in Banjarnegara for three reasons. First, private schools in Indonesia often have distinct educational cultures, especially regarding character education. Second, Banjarnegara's non-metropolitan context means students' digital experiences may differ from those in major cities like Jakarta or Surabaya, making it an underexplored setting for character strengths research. Third, including three school types (MA, SMA, SMK) enabled comparison across different educational environments within the same area. All participants were active internet and social media users, averaging 4-6 hours daily, which was vital since the study focused on character strengths in the digital context.

Table 1. Overview of Participant Characteristics

Characteristic	Category	Number (n)	Percentage
Gender	Male	151	42%
	Female	209	58%
Age	15 years old	72	20%
	16 years old	108	30%
	17 years old	126	35%
	18-19	54	15%
Type of School	MA	120	33.3%
	SMA	120	33.3%
	SMK	120	33.3%

Participants were selected using purposive sampling. Inclusion criteria were: (1) active students at a private Islamic high school, senior high school, or vocational high school; (2) willingness to participate by completing an informed consent form; (3) access to and active use of the internet and social media. For the qualitative stage, 9 participants (3 from each school) were purposively selected based on the quantitative analysis, with attention to gender diversity (4 males, 5 females) and character strengths scores (high, medium, low). This selection aimed to obtain in-depth data that represented variations in student character profiles.

Sampling Procedures

Participants were selected via a two-phase process consistent with the sequential explanatory mixed-methods approach. In the initial quantitative phase, individuals from three private schools in Banjarnegara—representing different educational streams: MA (Islamic), SMA (general), and SMK (vocational)—were recruited. These schools were chosen based on three criteria: (1) willingness to participate; (2) representation of each educational track; and (3) students' access to internet and social media, essential for exploring character strengths in a digital context. Regarding sampling limitations, purposive sampling is a non-probability method, so it is not claimed to be statistically representative of the broader Indonesian student population. However, parametric tests are used because they are robust against violations of normality in large samples (Blanca et al., 2017; Rasch & Guiard, 2004) and are valid for Likert-scale data (Norman, 2010; Sullivan & Artino, 2013). Following Mircioiu & Atkinson (2017), non-parametric Mann-Whitney U tests served as robustness checks and confirmed the results' pattern. The application of parametric methods to Likert-scale data is also common in Indonesian research, exemplified by the validation of DASS-21 using the Rasch model (Natanael, 2026; Ifdil et al., 2022), Confirmatory Factor Analysis (Susanti et al., 2022), and linear regression (Heriningsih et al., 2021), demonstrating that parametric approaches are feasible when psychometric assumptions are satisfied.

All participants received both written and verbal information about the study and gave their informed consent. Participation was voluntary, with no incentives offered to pressure involvement. Participants were explicitly told they could withdraw at any time without repercussions. After the quantitative analysis, participants for in-depth interviews were purposively selected using a maximum variation sampling strategy. The selection was based on three criteria: (1) School type—three students from each of the three tracks (MA, SMA, SMK), ensuring gender variation; (2) Character strengths scores—classified into high (scores ≥ 1 SD above the mean), medium (within ± 1 SD of the mean), and low (scores ≥ 1 SD below the mean), following standard practice in psychological research (Field, 2024); (3) Gender diversity—comprising 4 males and 5 females—to explore gender patterns observed in the quantitative phase.

The qualitative phase aimed for analytical depth rather than statistical generalization. In mixed-methods research, qualitative samples are usually smaller than quantitative ones because the goal is to shed light on quantitative results, not to represent a population (Creswell & Clark, 2017). A sample of 9 participants (3 from each school) was deemed sufficient to reach thematic saturation, meaning no new information emerged after a certain point. By the seventh interview, no new themes appeared, and the eighth and ninth interviews merely confirmed previous findings (Braun & Clarke, 2021). In qualitative research, saturation justifies sample size rather than a fixed number. This study emphasizes depth over breadth. With only 9 participants, broad generalization to all Indonesian students isn't possible—that's not our aim. Instead, we seek to understand how and why the patterns observed in the survey occur in students' real lives. Nine participants are suitable for this purpose and align with similar mixed-methods research (Lavy, 2020).

All participants received a small token of appreciation for their time. Quantitative participants got a snack package, while Qualitative participants received IDR 50,000 in cash per person. The study was conducted in 2025, before Universitas Negeri Semarang's research ethics committee was officially established later that year. Thus, formal ethical approval was not obtained. However, as Resosudarmo (2022) highlights, in Indonesia, where many universities are still developing formal IRB structures, researchers should prioritise informed consent, confidentiality, and voluntary participation as essential ethical safeguards. Mertens (2019) also notes that without formal IRBs, researchers carry primary ethical responsibility for protecting participants. Following guidelines from the Indonesian Psychological Society (HIMPSSI, 2010) and the American Psychological Association (APA, 2016), this study adhered to three core principles: First, all participants and guardians for minors received written information about the study and signed informed consent forms. Second, participants were told they could withdraw at any time without penalty. Third, all data were anonymised and stored securely. The study used anonymous questionnaires and non-sensitive topics such as daily life, social media use, and character strengths, which Resnik (2015) and Kimmel (2009) classify as minimal-risk research often exempt from formal review even in established systems.

Instrumentation

This research utilized a quantitative tool adapted from the VIA Inventory of Strengths (VIA-IS), originally developed by Peterson & Seligman (2004). The VIA-IS is a self-report questionnaire that assesses 24 character strengths categorized into six universal virtues: Wisdom & Knowledge, Courage, Humanity, Justice, Temperance, and Transcendence. The Indonesian version adapted for this study included 24 items, each representing a specific strength, with responses on a 4-point Likert scale (1= strongly disagree, 4= strongly agree). Sample items are: "I enjoy trying new and unusual ways to do things" (Creativity); "I always try to help others in need" (Kindness); and "I remain optimistic even when facing difficulties" (Hope). The original VIA-IS has demonstrated reliability with Cronbach's alpha coefficients ranging from 0.70 to 0.87 across different populations (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). The Indonesian version was evaluated for validity and reliability. Validity was determined through corrected item-total correlation coefficients, with all 24 items surpassing the critical r value of 0.254 at a 5% significance level (coefficients ranged from 0.456 to 0.734). Reliability was measured using Cronbach's alpha, resulting in a coefficient of 0.927, which indicates very high internal consistency.

For qualitative data collection, a semi-structured interview guide was created based on the operational definitions of the 24 character strengths outlined in the VIA Classification. The guide featured open-ended questions aimed at understanding how students internalize and demonstrate character strengths in their everyday lives, especially within digital contexts. Sample questions included: “Can you describe a situation where you felt creative while using social media platforms?” and “How do you show kindness to friends on online platforms?” All interviews were conducted in Indonesian, audio-recorded with participants’ consent, and transcribed verbatim. The transcripts were analyzed using thematic analysis, following Braun & Clarke’s (2021) six-phase procedure. Details of the coding process, theme development, and credibility strategies are provided in the Design or Data Analysis section.

Procedures

This study employed a sequential explanatory mixed-methods design (Creswell & Clark, 2017), involving two distinct phases: first, collecting and analyzing quantitative data, followed by qualitative data collection and analysis. The main goal of this approach is to interpret qualitative findings to explain, expand upon, or contextualize quantitative results. The integration process follows this logic: (1) the quantitative phase identifies patterns in character strengths, such as dominant qualities, weaknesses, and gender differences across school types (MA, SMA, SMK); (2) the qualitative phase then investigates why these patterns exist and how students perceive and experience these strengths in their daily digital lives. Specifically, qualitative data were used to explain unexpected or contradictory findings (for example, why Creativity scores were low despite students engaging in creative activities), to deepen understanding of prevalent patterns (like how Hope and Gratitude are internalized in digital contexts), and to uncover contradictions (such as why Honesty scores were low even though students reported not spreading hoaxes).

During the first, quantitative stage, the research team administered the adapted VIA Inventory of Strengths questionnaire to 360 students from three types of schools (MA, SMA, SMK). Participants were grouped naturally based on gender and school level without any manipulation or random assignment. The study provided both written and verbal instructions explaining the research goals, how to complete the questionnaire, and confidentiality assurances. Students filled out the questionnaire independently in their classrooms. Data collection occurred in November-December 2025. After initial quantitative analysis, nine students (three from each school) were purposively chosen for in-depth interviews. Selection criteria included school type, character strengths scores (categorized as high, medium, or low to cover a range), and gender diversity (4 males, 5 females). The semi-structured interviews lasted 45-60 minutes each, conducted offline in school guidance counseling rooms and partly online via WhatsApp. Questions aimed to explore how students understand and experience the dominant or weak character strengths identified earlier (e.g., “You rated your creativity low, yet you mentioned enjoying drawing. Can you tell me more about that?”); how digital contexts—such as social media, online learning, and virtual interactions—influence the expression of their character strengths (e.g., “How do you show kindness to friends through social media?”); and whether certain strengths feel suppressed or amplified online versus offline. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants’ consent and transcribed verbatim.

Table 2. Integration of Quantitative and Qualitative Findings

Quantitative Finding	Qualitative Question	Qualitative Finding	Integration Outcome
Creativity low in SMA (mean= 2.69)	“Why do you think your creativity score was low?”	“I have creative ideas but no facilities to realize them”	Creativity is latent possessed but not actualized
Honesty low in SMA (mean=3.03)	“How do you behave honestly online?”	“I never spread hoaxes”	Context matters: honesty expressed differently in digital vs. real life
Hope high across all schools (mean=3.6-3.7)	“What makes you hopeful?”	“I believe I can succeed through technology”	Hope is activated by digital opportunities

Data Analysis

The interview transcripts were analysed using Braun & Clarke's (2021) six-step thematic analysis: (1) familiarisation, (2) initial code generation, (3) theme exploration, (4) theme review, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) report writing. As only one researcher conducted the analysis, systematic methods were employed to ensure accuracy. Phase 1 involved reading all nine transcripts multiple times to become familiar with them. Observations, recurring ideas, and unexpected responses were recorded in a reflexive journal. In Phase 2, open coding was conducted by assigning descriptive labels to text segments, with examples of codes provided in Table 3.

Table 3. Open Coding

Quote from Participant	Code
"My creativity is still hidden in my mind and imagination"	Creativity barriers
"I have no facilities to realize my ideas"	Lack of facilities
"I hope to earn money with my phone to make my parents happy"	Hope from technology
"I never spread hoaxes on social media"	Digital honesty
"If i use social media too long, I cannot communicate directly"	Social media reduces social skills

A reflective journal was maintained throughout this process to document coding choices, inquiries, and potential biases. In Phase 3, dedicated to theme searching (Axial Coding), related codes were grouped into emerging themes, as illustrated in Table 4.

Table 4. Axial Coding

Related Codes	Grouped Theme
"lack of facilities," "no equipment for creative project," "limited art facilities at school"	Structural barriers to creativity
"hope from smartphone," "optimism about future through technology," "believing in success via digital skills"	Technology-activated hope
"digital honesty," "never spread hoaxes," "careful about what I share online"	Context-specific honesty

Phase 4 involved reviewing themes, with each theme compared to the raw data to verify that it accurately captured participants' perspectives. Themes lacking enough supporting data were either discarded or merged. In Phase 5, themes were clearly defined and named, then organised around the research question, as illustrated in Table 5.

Table 5. Defining and Naming Themes

Research Question	Related Themes
RQ1: Profiles across school types	(Quantitative only)
RQ2: Gender differences	(Quantitative only)
RQ3: How students understand strengths in digital lives	Structural barriers to creativity, technology-activated hope, context-specific honesty, digital displacement of learning

Phase 6 focuses on ensuring trustworthiness and credibility strategies. Since the analysis was conducted by a single researcher, multiple approaches were used to strengthen credibility: (1) Reflexive journaling involved keeping a journal throughout the analysis to note initial impressions after each interview, coding decisions and reasons, emerging interpretations, alternative explanations, and potential biases. This journal acted as an audit trail for the process. (2) Peer debriefing entailed regular discussions of coding decisions and emerging themes with a faculty supervisor (co-author), who reviewed the coding scheme and challenged interpretations, providing an external check. (3) Member checking involved three participants, each from different school types, reviewing their interview

summaries. All confirmed the summaries accurately reflected their views, with no corrections requested. (4) Methodological triangulation systematically compared qualitative findings with quantitative results. (5) Thick description was achieved by including direct quotations from participants throughout the discussion to help readers assess the interpretative basis of the findings.

Data collection continued until thematic saturation was achieved, with no new themes emerging after the seventh interview. The eighth and ninth interviews merely confirmed existing themes. This suggests that the sample size was adequate for deepening and contextualising the quantitative results (Braun & Clarke, 2021). The thematic analysis focused specifically on Research Question 3: “How do students understand and express their character strengths within their digital lives?” The themes from the analysis directly address this question by highlighting how students face barriers in expressing their strengths, find hope through technology, perceive honesty online versus offline, and see digital entertainment displacing learning. The research process is illustrated in Figure 1.

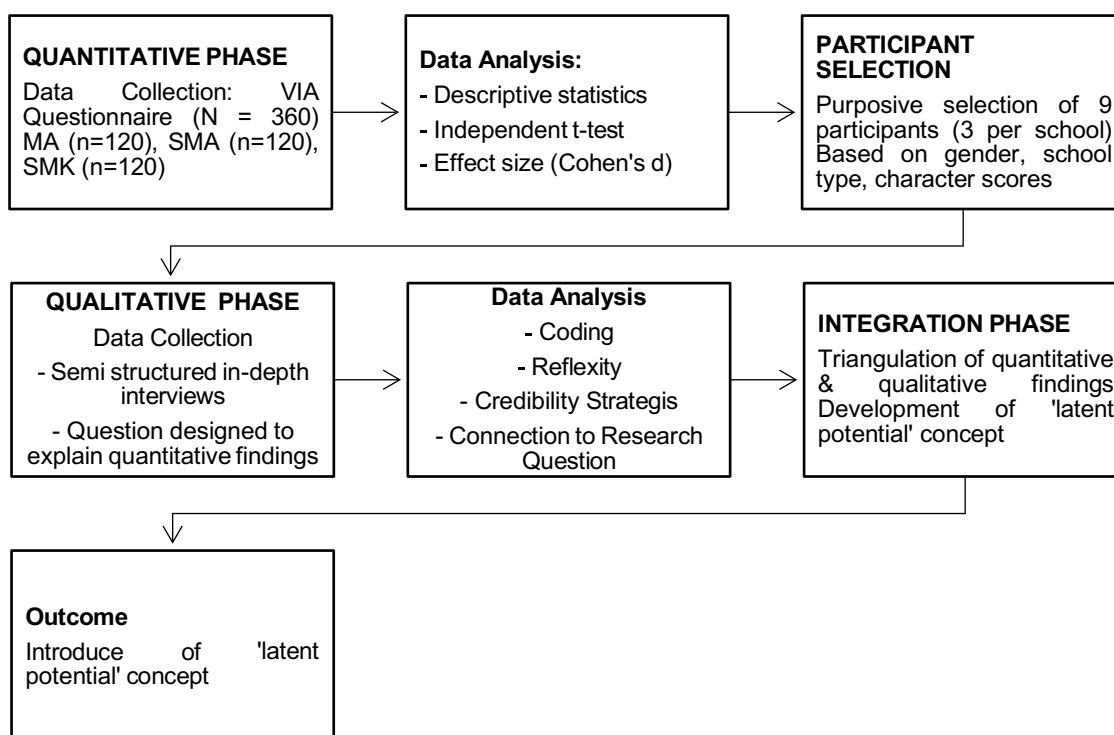


Figure 1. Sequential Explanatory Mixed-Methods Design Procedure (Adapted from Creswell & Clark, 2017)

This study used a sequential explanatory mixed-methods approach (Creswell & Clark, 2017): starting with the collection and analysis of quantitative data, then proceeding to qualitative data collection and analysis. The goal of the qualitative phase was to clarify, expand, and provide context for the quantitative results. Each analytical step was specifically designed to answer a particular research question, as detailed in Table 6.

Table 6. Alignment of Analysis with Research Question

Research Question	Analytical Method	What This Method Does
RQ1: How do character strengths profiles differ across MA, SMA, and SMK?	Descriptive statistics (means, Sds)	Shows which strengths are high or low in each school type
RQ2: To what extent do gender differences vary by school type?	Independent t-test, Cohen's d	Compares male and female students within each school; shows effect sizes
RQ3: How do students understand and express their in strengths in digital context?	Thematic analysis of interviews	Reveals students' own explanations for patterns seen in the quantitative data

Table 6 shows descriptive statistics for all 24-character strengths across MA, SMA, and SMK. Characteristics with mean scores above 3.5 were classified as high, while those below 3.0 were considered low. For Q2, independent t-tests were conducted separately for each school type to compare male and female students on all 24 strengths. Effect sizes were interpreted based on Gignac & Szodorai's (2016) guidelines. Normality was assessed using the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test, and Levene's Test checked for equal variances. When variances were unequal, Welch's correction was applied. Non-parametric Mann-Whitney U tests served as robustness checks. Because of purposive sampling, inferential statistics are used for within-sample comparisons rather than for generalising to populations. p-values serve as descriptive evidence within this sample. Thematic analysis addressed RQ3: How do students understand and express their character strengths in digital contexts?

Table 7. Coding Proces

Phase	Activity	Example
Phase 1-2: Open coding	Assigned descriptive labels to text segments	"I have creative ideas but no facilitates" → coded as "lack of facilities"
Phase 3-4: Axial coding	Grouped related codes into themes	"lack of facilites + no equipment + limited art supplies → structural barriers to creativity
Phase 5: Theme definition	Refined and named each theme	Technology-actived hope (codes: hope from smarthphone, optimism through digital skills)

Table 8. Credibility Strategies

Strategy	How It Was Applied
Reflexive journal	Maintained throughout to document coding decisions, emerging interpretations, and potential biases
Peer debriefing	Coding decisions discussed regularly with faculty supervisor (co-author), who reviewed the coding scheme and challenged interpretations
Member checking	Three participant reviewed their interview summaries; all confirmed accuracy
Methodological triangulation	Qualitative themes compare with quantitative results

After the seventh interview, no new themes emerged, and the eighth and ninth interviews only confirmed existing ones. This indicates that N=9 was sufficient, forming the core of the mixed-methods approach. The table below demonstrates how qualitative insights help explain specific quantitative patterns. Tables 7, 8, and 9 display the Coding Process, Credibility Strategies, and Integration of Quantitative and Qualitative Findings.

Table 9. Integration of Quantitative and Qualitative Findings

Quantitative Finding	Qualitative Asked	Question	Qualitative (Quote)	Finding	What Qualitative Explains
Creativity los in SMA (mean=2.69)	"Why do you think your creativity score was low?"		"I have creative ideas but no facilities to realize them"		Explains WHY low scores are not due to lack of ability, but lack of opportunity and facilities
Honesty low in SMA (mean=3.03)	"How do you behave honestly when using social media?"		"I never spread hoaxes on social media"		Reveals CONTEXT-SPECIFICITY honesty is expressed differently online than offline
Hope high across all schools (mean=3.6-3.7)	"What makes you feel hopeful about your future?"		"I belive I can succeed through technology and make my parents happy"		Explains HOW hope is activated by digital opportunities

Without the interviews, we would only see that creativity scores are low, but we wouldn't understand why students have ideas yet lack resources. Similarly, honesty scores appear low, but

interviews show students are actually honest online, so the low scores might reflect a general honesty issue rather than something specific to digital contexts. Since this study used purposive sampling, its results aren't statistically representative of all Indonesian secondary students—we do not claim to generalize. We only rely on independent t-tests and p-values for exploratory comparisons within this sample, not as evidence for the entire population. P-values help identify notable differences among these 360 students but do not imply anything about all Indonesian students. The pattern suggests gender differences could vary by school type, but we can't confirm that gender differences in character strengths are moderated by school type across the population. Following Rasch & Guiard (2004), we frame our analysis as hypothesis-generating rather than population-inference, highlighting the need for more rigorous sampling in future research and cautioning against drawing population-wide conclusions from this non-probability sample.

RESULTS

This section addresses the three research questions. First, descriptive statistics show character strengths profiles across MA, SMA, and SMK. Second, t-test results indicate gender differences within each school type. Third, quotes from qualitative interviews are integrated throughout to support and deepen these quantitative findings. Following the framework outlined in the Methods section, the results are presented as descriptive patterns within this sample, without implying they apply to the larger population. Since the response scale ranges from 1 to 4, means above 3.5 are considered high, between 3.0 and 3.4 are moderate, and below 3.0 are low.

Table 10. Descriptive Statistics of Research Variables (N = 360)

	Mean (MA)	Std. Deviation	Mean (SMA)	Std. Deviation	Mean (SMK)	Std. Deviation
Creativity	2.90	0.60	2.69	0.78	3.05	0.68
Curiosity	3.00	0.78	2.80	0.81	3.05	0.74
Open-Mindedness	2.96	0.97	3.10	0.80	3.25	0.68
Love of Learning	3.21	0.73	3.00	0.73	3.18	0.74
Perspective	2.90	0.72	2.75	0.83	2.98	0.77
Bravery	3.38	0.71	3.02	0.80	3.25	0.72
Perseverance	3.41	0.71	3.09	0.81	3.18	0.72
Integrity	3.01	0.70	3.13	0.73	3.25	0.63
Vitality	3.43	0.74	3.13	0.84	3.25	0.76
Love	3.53	0.67	3.36	0.78	3.45	0.72
Kindness	3.56	0.69	3.26	0.76	3.45	0.59
Social Intelligence	3.13	0.81	2.81	0.82	3.15	0.66
Teamwork	3.08	0.69	2.91	0.70	3.20	0.65
Honesty	3.11	0.90	3.03	0.82	3.35	0.70
Leadership	2.85	0.87	2.76	0.79	2.96	0.67
Forgiveness	3.26	0.97	3.16	0.95	3.25	0.87
Humility	3.60	0.66	3.25	0.86	3.52	0.62
Prudence	3.50	0.74	3.35	0.77	3.50	0.68
Self-Regulation	3.35	0.73	3.10	0.76	3.25	0.65
Appreciation of Beauty	3.53	0.62	3.00	0.84	3.31	0.68
Gratitude	3.60	0.58	3.47	0.67	3.61	0.58
Hope	3.71	0.58	3.47	0.75	3.74	0.49
Humor	3.38	0.73	3.34	0.82	3.60	0.59
Spirituality	3.36	0.71	3.29	0.84	3.51	0.63

Table 10 indicates that the MA profile achieved the highest average scores in Hope (M=3.71, SD=0.58), Gratitude (3.60, SD=0.58), Appreciation of Beauty (3.53, SD=0.62), Humility (3.60, SD=0.66), Prudence (3.50, SD=0.74), Kindness (3.56, SD=0.69), and Love (3.53, SD=0.67). All seven qualities had means greater than 3.5. For SMA, the highest scores were in Gratitude (3.47, SD=0.67), Hope (3.47, SD=0.75), Humor (3.34, SD=0.82), Love (3.36, SD=0.78), and Prudence (3.35, SD=0.77). The SMA profile was more focused, with only Gratitude and Hope above a 3.4 mean. In SMK, the top

scores included Hope (3.74, SD=0.49), Gratitude (3.61, SD=0.58), Spirituality (3.51, SD=0.63), Humor (3.60, SD=0.59), Humility (3.52, SD=0.62), and Prudence (3.50, SD=0.68), with six qualities exceeding a 3.5 average. In contrast, MA students showed weaknesses in Creativity, Curiosity, Perspective (Transcendence), and Leadership (Justice). Additionally, there were widespread weaknesses across 11 traits among high school students, with mean scores at or below 3.0 in Creativity, Curiosity, Love of Learning, Perspective (Wisdom & Knowledge), Bravery, Perseverance (Courage), Leadership, Honesty, Teamwork (Justice), Social Intelligence (Humanity), and Appreciation of Beauty (Transcendence). For vocational high school students, weaknesses were noted in Creativity, Curiosity, Perspective (Wisdom & Knowledge), and Leadership (Justice).

This study employed purposive sampling rather than random sampling. As a result, the findings are not generalizable to the entire population of Indonesian secondary students. This was a deliberate decision, not an error, since the aim was to compare male and female students within each school type and assess the size of differences, rather than make broad population claims. We used independent t-tests and p-values solely to identify patterns within this sample. P-values are not interpreted as evidence for the larger population; they simply indicate which differences among the 360 students are noteworthy. In other words, we report p-values to describe our sample, not to suggest these findings apply to all Indonesian students. Even with non-probability samples, p-values help distinguish large from small differences within the sample, compare effect sizes with those from other studies, and generate hypotheses for future research using probability sampling. The Kolmogorov-Smirnov test indicated significant deviations from normality, which is expected for Likert-scale data (1–4), as they are bounded and tend to produce non-normal distributions (Norman, 2010; Sullivan & Artino, 2013). Non-normality is a limitation of this study. However, parametric tests were used because simulation studies show they are robust to violations of normality, especially with respect to Type I error control. Blanca et al. (2017) conducted extensive Monte Carlo simulations with various non-normal social science data and found the F-test, similar to the t-test, remained reliable in all cases studied, regardless of sample size or distribution shape. Likewise, Mircioiu & Atkinson (2017) concluded that for groups with more than 30 samples, parametric tests applied to Likert-scale data are sufficiently robust. To verify our results, we also performed a non-parametric Mann-Whitney U test on a subset of character strengths; the pattern of significant and non-significant differences matched the t-test findings. This consistency, supported by existing literature (Blanca et al., 2017; Mircioiu & Atkinson, 2017), indicates our results are not merely artefacts of normality violations. We present t-test results primarily because they are more widely understood and include effect sizes. We acknowledge the non-normality limitation and confirm our findings with the non-parametric test.

Table 11 offers a detailed summary of the t-test outcomes, listing t-values, degrees of freedom, p-values, Cohen's d, and their interpretations for all 24 character strengths across the three school categories.

Table 11. Independent T-Test Results: Differences in Character Strengths Based on Gender

Character Strengths	MA (N = 34 male, 86 female)			SMA (N = 63 male, 57 female)			SMK (N = 60 male, 60 female)		
	t	p	d	t	p	d	t	p	d
Creativity	3.080	0.003	0.56	-0.142	0.888	-0.03	-0.178	0.859	-0.03
Curiosity	0.058	0.954	0.01	-0.648	0.518	-0.12	-0.527	0.599	-0.10
Open-Mindedness	1.056	0.293	0.21	0.641	0.523	0.12	-1.534	0.128	-0.28
Love of Learning	-1.760	0.081	-0.36	-1.760	0.081	-0.32	-0.262	0.794	-0.05
Perspective	1.643	0.104	0.27	0.930	0.354	0.17	-0.565	0.573	-0.10
Bravery	1.607	0.111	0.33	0.869	0.386	0.16	1.929	0.057	0.36
Perseverance	-1.597	0.133	-0.32	-0.055	0.956	-0.01	-2.341	0.021	-0.43
Integrity	0.081	0.935	0.02	0.161	0.872	0.03	0.081	0.175	-0.25
Vitality	-2.474	0.015	-0.50	0.990	0.324	0.18	-1.146	0.254	-0.21
Love	-2.099	0.038	-0.43	-0.470	0.640	-0.09	-0.849	0.397	-0.16
Kindness	-3.317	0.002	-0.78	0.060	0.952	0.01	-1.664	0.099	-0.30
Social Intelligence	-0.792	0.430	-0.16	-1.774	0.079	-0.32	-2.036	0.044	-0.37
Teamwork	-1.495	0.138	-0.30	-0.321	0.749	-0.06	-1.495	0.389	-0.16

Honesty	-2.418	0.017	-0.49	-0.793	0.429	-0.15	-0.529	0.598	-0.10
Leadership	-2.064	0.041	-0.42	-0.207	0.836	-0.04	-0.298	0.766	0.05
Forgiveness	-0.837	0.405	-0.17	-0.273	0.785	-0.05	1.933	0.056	0.36
Humility	-1.434	0.154	-0.29	0.709	0.480	0.13	2.542	0.012	0.47
Prudence	0.076	0.940	0.02	-0.011	0.991	-0.01	0.076	0.786	0.05
Self-Regulation	-1.249	0.214	-0.25	-0.071	0.944	-0.01	-1.249	0.834	-0.04
Appreciation of Beauty	-0.990	0.324	-0.20	-0.418	0.677	-0.08	-0.990	0.113	-0.29
Gratitude	-2.454	0.018	-0.55	-0.593	0.554	-0.11	-0.579	0.564	-0.11
Hope	-1.078	0.283	-0.22	-0.560	0.577	-0.10	-1.568	0.120	-0.28
Humor	-3.033	0.003	-0.62	-1.003	0.318	-0.18	-2.284	0.024	-0.41
Spirituality	-0.804	0.423	-0.16	0.682	0.496	0.13	-0.804	0.678	0.08

Note: Negative t-values indicate higher scores for female students; positive t-values indicate higher scores for male students. Cohen's d interpretation based on Gignac & Szodorai (2016): 0.20 = small, 0.41 = medium, 0.62 = large. *p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001.

In MA, eight character strengths showed significant gender differences. Female students scored higher than males in Kindness ($t(46.27) = -3.317, p=0.002, d=-0.78$), a large effect, followed by Humor ($t(118) = -3.033, p=0.003, d=-0.62$), Gratitude ($t(50.43) = -2.454, p=0.018, d=-0.55$), Vitality ($t(118) = -2.474, p=0.015, d=-0.50$), Honesty ($t(118) = -2.418, p=0.017, d=-0.49$), Leadership ($t(118) = -2.064, p=0.041, d=-0.42$), and Love ($t(118) = -2.099, p=0.038, d=-0.43$). Conversely, male students only had a significant advantage in Creativity ($t(76.92)=3.080, p=0.003, d=0.56$), showing a medium to large effect. No significant gender differences were observed in cognitive or self-regulatory traits such as Bravery, Perseverance, Integrity, Self-Regulation, and Spirituality. The lack of statistically significant differences in SMA suggests that, within this sample, gender differences in character strengths are not large enough to detect with the given sample size. This contrasts with MA and SMK, where differences were evident. Possible reasons include curriculum differences, equal access to technology, or school culture that reduces gender stereotyping. Larger, probability-based samples are necessary for further research to determine if true gender differences in character strengths vary by school type in the broader population. In SMK, four character strengths differed significantly by gender. Female students scored higher in Social Intelligence ($t(116.47) = -2.036, p=0.044, d=-0.37$), Humor ($t(113.37) = -2.284, p=0.024, d=-0.41$), and Perseverance ($t(118) = -2.341, p=0.021, d=-0.43$). Male students scored higher than females in Humility ($t(118) = 2.542, p=0.012, d=0.47$). No other character strengths showed significant gender differences.

DISCUSSION

Before interpreting the findings, it is important to clarify what “dominance” signifies in this study. In line with the descriptive threshold set in the Results section (means > 3.5 on a 1-4 scale), a character strength was deemed “dominant” if it met two conditions: (a) its average score exceeded 3.5 in at least two of the three school types, and (b) it ranked among the top five strengths within each school type. According to these criteria, Hope and Gratitude consistently qualified as dominant strengths across MA, SMA, and SMK. These virtues (transcendence) showed consistently high mean scores across the three school types (MA: 3.71 and 3.60; SMA: 3.47 and 3.47; SMK: 3.74 and 3.61). These results echo earlier research in the Indonesian educational setting (Listiyandini & Akmal, 2018; Muslikah et al., 2026), indicating that spiritual and positive future-oriented strengths are common among Indonesian secondary students. Qualitative data further detail how these strengths are internalized, with students expressing hope through aspirations linked to digital opportunities (“I hope to earn money with my phone to make my parents happy”) and gratitude through awareness of their current well-being (“I am grateful today to be able to breathe, eat, and be happy”).

The idea of ‘latent potential’ must be approached with care. Data reveal a discrepancy: self-report scores for Creativity were low across all schools (MA=2.90, SMA=2.69, SMK=3.05), yet interviews showed students engaged in creative activities like drawing, crafting, and imagining inventions. One SMK student said: “I created a tool puller in my imagination and on paper, and my

teacher approved it, even though it hasn't been realized yet." From this, we don't directly conclude "hidden potential exists." Instead, we hypothesize that low scores may not indicate a lack of creativity but rather a lack of opportunity, facilities, or courage to express it in measurable ways. This aligns with Bandura's (1999) triadic reciprocal causation model, which states that behavior (creative expression) results from the interaction of personal factors (creative ideas), environmental factors (facilities, encouragement), and behavioral factors (past success or failure). In this context, low self-report scores may be due to environmental limitations rather than an absence of creativity. Students said their ideas remain "in my mind and imagination" because they lack physical resources (like art supplies or tools) or encouragement from teachers or parents. These environmental barriers can suppress creative expression, leading to low scores even if creative potential exists. We call this phenomenon "latent potential"—strengths that are present but not fully realized because of situational constraints.

It is crucial to note that "latent potential" is a tentative concept derived from observed discrepancies, not a conclusively proven mechanism. Other explanations for the discrepancy exist. For instance, the self-report measure of Creativity might only capture certain types, like innovative problem-solving, and overlook others, such as artistic-expressive creativity. MA students who enjoy drawing and calligraphy may genuinely demonstrate creativity, yet the VIA-IS Creativity items might not fully reflect this. A widespread weakness was observed across all school types in virtues related to Wisdom & Knowledge—especially Creativity, Curiosity, and Perspective—with the most significant deficits in SMA, where eleven character strengths scored below a mean of 3.0, including Love of Learning, Bravery, Perseverance, Honesty, and Social Intelligence. The consistently low Creativity scores (MA=2.90, SMA=2.69, SMK=3.05) resonate with Ramadani et al. (2025), who noted students increasingly rely on technology and AI for quick answers, possibly undermining critical thinking and intrinsic motivation for deep exploration. In the digital context, this trend suggests students risk becoming passive content consumers instead of active, critical creators. Nevertheless, qualitative data offers a more nuanced view. Despite low quantitative Creativity scores, students from all schools spontaneously shared examples demonstrating creative thinking. An MA student recounted enjoying a calligraphy competition; an SMK student described designing a new tool. These qualitative insights imply that low self-report scores do not necessarily mean a lack of creative capacity. One tentative hypothesis for future research is that students may have latent creative potential hindered by situational factors such as limited facilities, lack of encouragement, or few opportunities for expression. We call this phenomenon 'latent potential', referring to strengths students possess but have not fully realized.

A similar discrepancy was noted with Honesty. In SMA, the average Honesty score was relatively low (M=3.03), yet students claimed during interviews that they "never spread hoaxes on social media."

Instead of attributing honesty to being "dynamic" or "situational," more straightforward explanations are plausible. First, self-reports may reflect behavior specific to certain contexts, such as social media, where tangible consequences like reports or bans exist. Second, social desirability bias might influence self-reports differently than interview responses. Third, there could be a real difference between overall

honesty (abstract concept) and honesty in digital contexts. Without further research, this discrepancy remains an observation, not a conclusive finding. These observations suggest that counselors could benefit from developing assessments tailored to specific situations (e.g., online versus offline), instead of relying solely on general trait measures. Methods like strength-based assessment and solution-focused brief therapy, which explore exceptions and contextual resources, may help uncover hidden strengths. These implications are preliminary and need further empirical validation. Statements by an MA student about drawing and participating in calligraphy competitions illustrate that their Creativity is expressive and appreciates Islamic arts. While their quantitative Creativity score is low, qualitatively they engage actively in creative activities. This contradiction indicates that quantitative measures of Creativity may lean towards innovative, problem-solving creativity, whereas students' displayed Creativity is more artistic and expressive. For counselors, this highlights the importance of differentiating among types of Creativity. The boarding school setting, which limits technology use, offers a safe environment for traditional creativity to thrive but might not foster the digital-innovative creativity vital in today's world.

SMK students described having creative ideas that remained unrealised. This example illustrates the gap between expressed ideas and actual outcomes, not evidence of "latent potential." Similarly, students from other schools shared instances of curiosity (e.g., "I'm often curious about the secrets

behind a phenomenon“) and perspective-taking (e.g., "I don't directly judge someone as bad if they make a mistake; I think, oh maybe they were in a hurry"). Based on these qualitative examples and statistically observed patterns, we infer—rather than directly measure—that some students may have cognitive abilities not fully reflected in their self-reported scores or behaviours. We call this potential ‘latent potential’—capacities that may exist but are not always expressed. It's important to note this is an interpretative inference rather than a directly measured fact. Alternative explanations, such as measurement mismatch (for example, the self-report scale may not capture artistic or imaginative creativity) or social desirability bias, are also plausible.

The current data regarding the digital environment are correlational and cross-sectional, so no causal claims can be drawn. The idea that passive digital consumption might hinder strength actualisation is a hypothesis for future research rather than a conclusion of this study. To explore such causal relationships, longitudinal or experimental studies are required. An important additional finding from qualitative data is the vulnerability of certain character traits with moderate average scores, such as Love of Learning, which is most threatened in the digital era. Qualitative insights show a significant shift of academic time towards digital entertainment. Students admitted, “We sometimes prefer to play on our phones, like games or scrolling through TikTok, instead of studying,” and noted that “the time previously spent reading books has been replaced by online habits.” This supports Nur & Abdurrazzaq (2024), who documented the growing intrusion of social media into students' study time. Additionally, the decline of Social Intelligence emerged as a critical issue, with students stating, “If we use social media too long, it becomes hard to communicate face-to-face.” This aligns with Nur & Abdurrazzaq's (2024) conclusion that excessive social media use reduces opportunities for meaningful in-person interactions, hindering interpersonal skill development. Bravery is also waning because “being online doesn't reveal who we really are,” leading to a decline in Bravery. To address these challenges, students suggest strengthening character through “educational games, scenario simulations, and community projects.” Guidance counsellors are encouraged to actively assess students' potential through voluntary evaluations and to maximise the use of screen projection to promote social openness and technological understanding. Combining quantitative and qualitative data not only confirms these findings but also enriches understanding of character development in the digital age.

This study provides preliminary insights into the potential relevance of the VIA Classification (Peterson & Seligman, 2004) in the digital age, without aiming to revise or expand the framework. The findings suggest that certain Transcendence strengths, like Hope and Gratitude, are consistently highly endorsed across various school types. Conversely, Wisdom & Knowledge strengths such as Creativity, Curiosity, and Perspective tend to have lower endorsement rates. Since no formal moderation analysis was conducted, we cannot determine whether digital environments influence these patterns. Future research using appropriate statistical techniques, such as investigating interaction effects in regression models, is needed to determine whether digital exposure affects how character strengths are manifested. The introduced concept of ‘latent potential’ is meant as a heuristic for future studies rather than a theoretical modification of the VIA framework. The discrepancy observed between low self-reports of Creativity and qualitative instances of creative thinking is notable, but at this point, it remains an observation requiring further research. Several plausible explanations exist, including measurement mismatches or contextual factors. Regarding the trait-like nature of character strengths, the current data do not directly challenge the VIA framework. It's possible that low self-reported creativity accurately reflects a low trait level, while qualitative expressions might represent isolated episodes rather than stable traits. The finding that some students reported creative ideas that remained unrealised could be understood within the existing VIA framework as influenced by environmental constraints on expression, without the need to revise the framework. Therefore, the concept of ‘latent potential’ is presented as a complementary heuristic to highlight the gap between potential and expression, not as a replacement or extension of the VIA classification.

In summary, this study's theoretical contributions are modest and preliminary. Its main empirical contribution is to provide descriptive data on character strengths across three types of Indonesian schools and to formulate hypotheses, while acknowledging several methodological limitations when interpreting the results. First, the data violated normality assumptions, which is common with Likert scale data (Norman, 2010). Although robustness checks using the non-parametric Mann-Whitney test confirmed the results' pattern (Blanca et al., 2017; Mircioiu & Atkinson, 2017), non-normality remains a limitation.

Second, purposive sampling was employed, limiting generalisability beyond this sample. Third, each character strength was measured with a single item, which may not fully capture the construct. Fourth, the cross-sectional design precludes causal inferences. Future studies should use probability sampling, multi-item scales, and longitudinal designs to verify and extend these findings.

CONCLUSIONS

Three key findings emerged from the survey data and interviews. Firstly, Hope and Gratitude scores were consistently high across all school types, whereas Creativity, Perspective, and Leadership scores remained consistently low. Secondly, gender patterns varied by school type, with significant differences observed in Ma and SMK but no notable differences in SMA. Lastly, interviews indicated that the low creativity scores did not reflect a lack of creativity; students reported having creative ideas but lacked the facilities to bring them to life.

First, Hope and Gratitude received high average scores across all three types of schools. This trend echoes earlier Indonesian research (Listiyandini & Akmal, 2018; Muslikah et al., 2026), which also identified spirituality and gratitude as common traits among students. The data do not claim to reinforce or expand the VIA framework; they simply align with previous observations within this cultural context. Second, Creativity, Curiosity, and Perspective had low-average scores across all school types. This finding is consistent with Ramadani et al. (2025), who noted that students increasingly depend on technology for quick answers. However, qualitative interviews offered a more nuanced understanding—students with low creativity scores still described creative ideas. This discrepancy between low scores and rich descriptions may suggest what we tentatively call ‘latent potential’—strengths students possess but may not yet express due to external barriers. This remains a hypothesis for future research, not a definitive conclusion. Third, interview data revealed students often felt digital activities displaced academic time. Some reported spending more time on social media than reading, while others found face-to-face communication more difficult after extended online interactions. These statements reflect perceived correlations, not causal links. The study cannot determine if digital exposure causes declines; it only reports students’ perceptions of their experiences.

The findings highlight two practical insights for school counselors. First, low self-reported character strength scores might not reflect the actual presence of those qualities. For example, students with low creativity scores still expressed creative ideas, so counselors could ask students about their abilities instead of relying solely on questionnaire results. Second, gender patterns differed by school type: no differences were observed in SMA, whereas differences emerged in MA and SMK. This indicates that counselors should consider their specific school context rather than assuming uniform gender patterns. These suggestions are initial and need further validation.

This study has several limitations. First, each character strength was measured using a single item; using multi-item scales could yield more reliable results (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Second, conducting multiple statistical comparisons increases the risk of Type I errors, so findings should be interpreted with caution. Third, the reliance on self-report measures might be affected by social desirability bias. Fourth, the sample was confined to one district in Central Java, which limits the ability to generalize the findings. Fifth, the cross-sectional design does not allow for causal inferences. Sixth, although saturation was achieved, the qualitative sample was small. Future research should incorporate multi-item scales, replicate with larger probability samples, and adopt a longitudinal approach.

These contributions collectively establish a strong base for creating culturally responsive, strengths-based counseling interventions that address the specific challenges and opportunities Indonesian youth encounter in an increasingly digital environment. Ultimately, this study offers a detailed mapping of student character strengths in the digital age, highlighting both solid psychological foundations and key vulnerabilities. By combining quantitative and qualitative methods, it delivers a nuanced insight into character dynamics and provides an empirical basis for designing targeted, strengths-based guidance and counseling strategies suited to the unique landscape of the digital era.

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