

Integrating Strength-Based Character Design and Role Play for Self-Projection and Reflection: A Synthetic Data Exploration

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Abstract

This study proposes a novel framework for superhero character design as a tool for self-reflection, integrating the VIA Classification of Character Strengths with the Gestalt Empty Chair Technique. Participants would design superhero characters that project their personal strengths and engage in imagined dialogues with the character using the empty chair method. This approach positions character design as a mirror for emotional and cognitive exploration. To explore this framework, synthetic data simulating 30 character designs were analyzed to model how strengths are projected and how role-play enhances self-awareness. Preliminary findings indicate strong alignment between designs and strengths (Consistency Score: $M = 80\%$, $SD = 5.2\%$), a 60% shift toward calmer emotions, and improved self-efficacy ($+1.5$, $SD = 0.6$, $p < 0.05$). Bias was controlled through randomization and statistical validation (Chi-Square, $p = 0.07$). As a proof of concept, synthetic data limits generalizability; however, results suggest promise for creative self-exploration. Future studies will engage real participants and leverage machine learning for deeper analysis.

Keywords: strength-based psychology, self-projection, self-reflection, character design, design for well-being

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Introduction

Positive psychology focuses on developing personal strengths as a way to improve well-being, not only for those recovering from psychological challenges but also for people in everyday life seeking personal strength (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Using one's strengths and virtues can create genuine positive feelings — the kind that come from meaningful effort rather than shortcuts (Seligman, 2002). This strength-based approach helps individuals recognize their capacities, build resilience, and apply these qualities in daily life, whether in clinical or non-clinical settings.

A key challenge lies in finding engaging, accessible ways to “exercise” these strengths beyond conventional tools such as questionnaires or structured interviews. The VIA Classification of Character Strengths (Peterson & Seligman, 2004) provides a structured method for identifying strengths, but alternative creative methods may be better suited to spark self-awareness and sustained engagement (Niemic, 2017). Superhero characters, with their symbolic richness and universal appeal, offer a compelling medium for representing personal strengths, inviting individuals to project aspects of themselves into imaginative yet meaningful forms (Ansari & Scott, 2006; Lester, 2006).

This study proposes a framework that combines the VIA Classification of Character Strengths with the Gestalt Empty Chair Technique (Perls et al., 1951), using superhero character design as both a creative medium and a “data container” for personal strengths. Participants (simulated in this proof-of-concept study) design superheroes that embody their strengths and engage in imagined dialogues with them, promoting both self-projection and self-reflection. Synthetic data from 30 simulated characters were analyzed to model expected patterns, explore reflection outcomes, and prototype methods for data collection — laying the groundwork for future studies with real participants and adaptive analysis techniques.

Purpose of the Study

This study aims to propose a novel framework for superhero character design, integrating the VIA Classification of Character Strengths as a creative tool for self-reflection in non-clinical settings such as workshops, classrooms, and other creative learning spaces. It explores how superhero characters can serve both as engaging mediums for self-reflection and as “data containers” through which participants project personal strengths, resilience, and life situations using visual elements, symbols, storytelling, and role-play. The study also seeks to define concepts for creative activities that foster resilience, enhance emotional awareness, and encourage deeper self-reflection.

Literature Review

This study draws on 3 key areas of literature.

Positive Psychology & Strengths — Positive psychology emphasizes building well-being by identifying and applying one's *signature strengths* (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000; Seligman, 2002). The VIA Classification of Character Strengths (Peterson & Seligman, 2004) groups 24 strengths under six core virtues, providing a framework for recognizing and cultivating resilience and well-being.

Engaging Strategies & Creative Mediums — Strength-based tools and activities, such as intervention cards (Niemiec, 2015, 2017), help individuals connect with their strengths. Storytelling and superhero narratives have also been shown to symbolize resilience and overcoming challenges (Ansari & Scott, 2006; Lester, 2006), suggesting that playful, symbolic approaches can encourage personal reflection.

Self-Reflection Techniques — The Gestalt Empty Chair Technique (Perls et al., 1951) uses role-play and imagined dialogues to foster self-reflection. In this study, the technique is adapted for a non-clinical creative context, inviting participants to engage in dialogue with a self-designed superhero character.

Conceptual Framework

The proposed framework contains five stages designed to enhance awareness of personal character strengths through creative and non-clinical activities. Superheroes are used as a symbolic medium, combined with role-play techniques, to encourage engagement and self-reflection.

Stage 1 Awareness – Participants are introduced to strength-based approaches and the VIA Classification of Character Strengths, including the concept of signature strengths. Illustrated guides or visual cards are used to facilitate understanding.

Stage 2 Exploration – Using the strength cards, participants select 2–3 personal strengths. Facilitated activities, such as storytelling about past challenges, comparing oneself to fictional characters, and guided reflective questions (e.g., “What energizes you?” or “How do you handle challenges?”), help deepen personal connection to these strengths.

Stage 3 Superhero Character Design – Participants create a superhero persona that embodies their chosen strengths. This includes defining powers, a backstory, a name, and visual elements (symbols, colors) that represent each strength. The character is expressed through drawing or mixed-media creation.

Stage 4 Role-Play Session – Adapting the Gestalt Empty Chair Technique, participants identify a real-life challenge and engage in a dialogue alternating between themselves and their superhero character. This allows them to externalize perspectives and explore possible strengths-based responses.

Stage 5 Self-Reflection – Following the role-play, participants respond to guided questions addressing: Awareness of their personal strengths., Potential applications of these strengths in daily life or during challenges., Emotional and cognitive responses to the activities.

Additional considerations – To enrich the process, participants may engage in pre-session activities such as taking the VIA Survey or keeping a reflective journal to identify strengths in daily contexts. For those less confident in drawing, pre-designed visual elements (icons, stickers, templates) can support superhero creation. Before role-play, participants may also define a specific personal focus to make the reflective dialogue more targeted.

Building on the conceptual framework, the next step involves examining how the proposed activities can generate meaningful data for both analysis and future application. In this study, the “superhero” functions not only as a creative exercise but also as a data container holding

symbols of strengths, personal narratives, and reflective dialogues. While the long-term goal is to apply this approach with real participants, the current prototype uses synthetic data to model potential patterns of engagement. This allows us to test the framework's structure, simulate participant diversity, and explore how strengths, stories, and role-play dialogues can be captured, processed, and interpreted. The following section outlines the methodology for synthetic data creation, simulation parameters, and the metrics developed to assess the outcomes.

Methodology

Following the activities outlined in the conceptual framework, data were collected and processed with the “superhero” functioning as a data container — holding symbols of character strengths, personal narratives, and significant reflective dialogues. The primary purpose of this data collection is twofold: (1) to explore how strengths and self-reflection manifest through creative character design and role-play, and (2) to develop metrics that can be applied in future strength-based activities or media.

In this prototype study, synthetic data were used to simulate participant engagement within the proposed framework, allowing exploration of potential patterns before working with real participants. The synthetic dataset was designed to capture diversity in demographics, life scenarios, strengths representation, and narrative styles.

Synthetic Data Creation

A total of 30 character design profiles were generated with the following features:

- Demographics & Scenarios: Randomly assigned to ensure diversity.
- Data Structure: Each profile included (1) visual elements, (2) a backstory, (3) selected character strengths with weight levels, and (4) simulated dialogue from the role-play stage.
- Strengths: All 24 VIA Character Strengths were represented across the dataset.
- Bias Control: Randomization was combined with statistical checks (Chi-Square test, $p = 0.07$; entropy > 3.0) to reduce bias.

Stage-Specific Data Simulation

Stage 3 (Character Creation): Data included visual choices, strengths selection with weight levels, and full backstories.

Stage 4 (Role-Play Session): Dialogues were simulated based on two reflective prompts: *work-related stress* and *conflict with a friend*. Each scenario incorporated the character's chosen strengths as problem-solving tools.

Stage 5 (Post-Activity Reflection): Responses were simulated for four reflection areas:

- Strength Awareness – clarity in identifying personal strengths.
- Reflective Insight – new understanding of strength application.
- Self-Efficacy – confidence in addressing challenges.
- Emotional Shift – changes toward more positive emotional states.

Prototype Measurement Metrics

To evaluate outcomes, four main metric categories were developed:

1. Visual Elements Metrics
 - Color Palette: Frequency analysis of colors and their association with specific strengths (e.g., blue used in 50% of designs linked to self-regulation).
 - Symbol Frequency: Occurrence of recurring symbols and their meaning (e.g., wings in 40% of designs linked to hope).
 - Complexity: Average number of design elements, with higher counts often linked to creativity.
2. Backstory Metrics
 - Strength Frequency & Weight: Proportion of strengths embedded in narratives (e.g., hope [0.6] in 30% of backstories).
 - Narrative Arc: Patterns such as transformation (60%), potentially linked to resilience.
 - Purpose/Goal: Recurring mission types (e.g., “protect” in 50% of backstories).
 - Emotional Tone: Frequency of tones such as hopeful (40%) or determined.
3. Strengths Connection Metrics
 - Explicit Strength Mapping: Frequency and weight of visual/narrative elements that explicitly represent a strength (e.g., blue linked to self-regulation in 20 characters).
 - Weighted Consistency Score: Alignment between self-reported strengths and design choices (e.g., 80% average alignment across the dataset).
4. After Role-Play Metrics
 - Reflective Insight Frequency: Proportion of participants demonstrating new insights (e.g., 40% strength awareness).
 - Emotional Shift: Positive emotion increases during role-play (e.g., calm in 60% of dialogues).
 - Self-Efficacy Outcomes: Confidence gains post-activity (e.g., 70% reported improvement).
 - Dialogue Quality Score: Depth rating on a 1–5 scale (mean = 4.0).
 - Bias Score: Skewness/entropy check (e.g., 0.4; target < 0.3).
 - Self-Efficacy Index: Pre/post scale difference (e.g., +1.5 on a 1–7 scale).
 - Strength Awareness Score: Post-activity clarity of strengths recognition (mean = 5.2 on a 1–7 scale).

Together, these measures form a preliminary analytic framework for understanding how superhero-based creative role-play may foster strength awareness, reflective capacity, and emotional regulation. While this study used simulated data, the methodology is designed to be directly adaptable to real participant studies in future research.

Limitations

Several limitations should be noted. First, using synthetic data may not fully capture insights and emotional complexity found in real human dialogue during role-play. Subsequent studies involving actual participants are necessary to validate and expand upon the proposed framework. Second, in practical settings, participants may need more time and support to fully understand and apply the concept of character strengths. Finally, as the study addresses human emotions, further research and methodological development are required to enhance bias detection and control in future research.

Conclusion

This study's prototype findings from synthetic data show promising results. We observed a strong alignment between participants' chosen strengths and their superhero character designs, with an average consistency score of 80%. Participants also demonstrated moderate awareness of their strengths, and the self-efficacy index increased by about 150% from baseline. Additionally, 60% of simulated dialogues reflected a positive emotional shift toward calmness. The bias score remained low, indicating a fairly balanced dataset.

These results suggest that superhero characters can effectively serve as a creative medium and data container for exploring and expressing human strengths. While synthetic data has its limitations, this framework shows potential for supporting strength awareness and self-reflection, especially in non-clinical settings such as educational or community contexts.

Future research will involve real participants to validate and extend these findings. Expert evaluation will be important to calibrate the framework and improve post-activity assessments. We also plan to incorporate machine learning techniques to enhance data analysis and adaptability. Lastly, applying and testing this framework in specific real-world settings, like schools or community programs, will be a key step in our next phase of study.

Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

I declare the use of ChatGPT and Grammarly, AI Tools for paraphrasing, grammar, and writing assistance, which helped improve the clarity and readability of this manuscript.

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