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Transcendence Strengths Related to Appreciation and Protection of All People and Nature Among University Students

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Abstract

Universalism, as defined in Schwartz's theory of basic human values, reflects a motivational orientation toward understanding, appreciation, and protection of all people and nature. This study examines the psychological foundations of ethical concern and ecological sensitivity among university students, focusing on the role of transcendence strengths. A cross-sectional correlational design was employed and a total of 1240 students from five Spanish universities participated in the study, completing validated instruments designed to assess both transcendence strengths—spirituality, gratitude, hope/optimism, humor, and appreciation of beauty—and universalism. Stepwise regression analysis identified four strengths—gratitude, appreciation of beauty, hope/optimism, and spirituality—as significant predictors of ethical concern for others and nature, explaining 20.1% of the variance. These findings contribute to the growing body of research linking positive psychological traits with ethical engagement and environmental responsibility. They also suggest that fostering transcendence-related strengths in educational settings may enhance students' capacity for global empathy and moral development. Moreover, rather than functioning in isolation, spirituality interacts dynamically with other transcendence strengths. The study highlights the importance of integrating transcendental dimensions into sustainability discourse. Future research should explore these relationships across cultures and developmental stages to inform policy and educational practice.

Keywords: universalism; transcendence; positive psychology; people and nature

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Academic Editor: Ralph Hansmann

Received: 1 October 2025
Revised: 27 October 2025
Accepted: 1 November 2025
Published: 5 November 2025

Citation: López, J.; Oporto-Alonso, M.; Sanz-Magallón, G.; Noriega, C. Transcendence Strengths Related to Appreciation and Protection of All People and Nature Among University Students. *Sustainability* **2025**, *17*, 9870. https://doi.org/10.3390/su17219870

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1. Introduction

Schwartz's theory identifies ten basic human values that are recognized across cultures and organized in a circular motivational structure, reflecting dynamic relations of conflict and compatibility among values. This structure suggests a universal organization of human motivations. In Schwartz's theory of basic human values, spirituality is not defined as a standalone value but is conceptually embedded within the motivational goals of benevolence and universalism. Benevolence is characterized by the preservation and enhancement of the welfare of close others, and universalism by the understanding, appreciation, and protection of all people and nature.

Schwartz acknowledges that "spiritual life" is associated with both values, suggesting that spirituality contributes to the internalized motivation to care for others and to transcend self-interest. Although early versions of the theory considered spirituality as a

potential eleventh value, it was excluded due to inconsistent cross-cultural interpretations. Nevertheless, its presence within the item sets universalism indicates that spirituality plays a latent role in promoting ecological orientations [1,2].

Moreover, the theory's circular structure places universalism within the self-transcendence dimension, which contrasts with self-enhancement values. This position reinforces the idea that spirituality aligns with values that foster environmental stewardship. Cross-cultural studies further support this link, showing that individuals who prioritize spiritual goals tend to score higher on universalism, highlighting the integrative role of spirituality in shaping ethical and inclusive value orientations [1].

The value of universalism, as defined by Schwartz, encompasses the goals of understanding, appreciation, tolerance, and protection for the welfare of all people and for nature. This motivational orientation closely aligns with the ethical foundation of sustainability, which is understood not merely as a technical or ecological concern, but as a profound ethical commitment to justice, equity, and the well-being of current and future generations. Universalism promotes a worldview that transcends individual or group interests, encouraging actions that safeguard environmental integrity and social cohesion—principles that are central to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) [3]. The SDGs themselves reflect universalistic values by addressing global challenges such as poverty, inequality, climate change, and biodiversity loss through inclusive and cooperative strategies.

In this sense, universalism provides a moral and motivational basis for sustainability, fostering the kind of global solidarity and ecological responsibility necessary for transformative change. Moreover, the integration of universalism into sustainability discourse reinforces the idea that protecting the planet and promoting human dignity are not separate goals, but interdependent dimensions of a shared ethical vision for a livable future. Empirical research has shown that universalism values are particularly predictive of pro-environmental attitudes and behaviors, especially when these values are central to one's self-concept and activated in relevant contexts. For instance, individuals who prioritize biospheric and altruistic concerns are more likely to engage in sustainable consumption, support environmental policies, and participate in collective actions aimed at ecological preservation. The salience of universalism also enhances the perceived moral obligation to act sustainably, especially when environmental issues are framed as threats to fairness and justice [1,4].

A robust and consistent finding in the literature is that self-transcendence values—particularly universalism—are positively associated with pro-environmental behavior, whereas self-enhancement values tend to show a weaker or negative relationship. This pattern has been replicated across various cultural contexts in studies examining behaviors such as recycling, conserving water and energy, and using public transportation, including in countries spanning Europe, Latin America, and North America [5].

Additionally, research employing the egoistic–altruistic–biospheric values framework, which conceptualizes the contrast between self-enhancement and self-transcendence, has produced similar results. Altruistic and biospheric values are central to environmental decision-making and influence behavior both directly and indirectly through beliefs about environmental consequences and personal responsibility. Moreover, these values exhibit broad bandwidth, meaning they can shape a wide range of behaviors—from personal choices to civic engagement—even if their predictive precision for specific actions is moderate. Importantly, values such as universalism and biospheric concern are relatively stable across time and cultures, reinforcing their relevance in shaping ethical and ecological engagement among young adults, particularly within educational and policy frameworks [1,6].

The Values In Action (VIA) Classification of Character Strengths and Virtues, developed by Peterson and Seligman [7], identifies six core virtues that are universally valued across cultures and philosophical traditions: wisdom, courage, humanity, justice, temperance, and transcendence. Among these, transcendence is particularly concerned with fostering a connection to something greater than the self, promoting meaning, purpose, and psychological resilience. Within the transcendence virtue, five-character strengths are included: spirituality, gratitude, hope, humor, and appreciation of beauty. Each of these strengths contributes uniquely to the experience of transcendence.

Spirituality involves beliefs about the meaning of life and a sense of connection to the sacred or transcendent. It is associated with well-being, life satisfaction, and coping with adversity. It provides comfort in times of adversity and helps individuals orient their lives toward values and purpose. Across cultures, spirituality is expressed in diverse ways, from organized religion to personal contemplative practices such as meditation and mindfulness [7].

Gratitude involves recognizing and appreciating the positive aspects of life and the contributions of others. It includes both the emotional experience of thankfulness and the behavioral expression of appreciation. Gratitude strengthens interpersonal relationships, enhances psychological well-being, and fosters prosocial behavior. It is considered a moral effect that reinforces social bonds [7].

Hope, also referred to as optimism or future-mindedness, is the expectation that good things will happen and the belief that one can take action to achieve desired outcomes. It involves both agency (goal-directed motivation) and pathways (strategic planning). Hope sustains individuals through challenges, promotes resilience, and is linked to better coping, achievement, and physical health [7].

Humor is the capacity to perceive, enjoy, and express what is amusing or playful. It includes the ability to laugh at oneself, to bring joy to others, and to see the lighter side of life. Humor fosters social cohesion, relieves stress, and enhances emotional well-being. It is a mature coping mechanism and a marker of psychological health. While humor styles vary across cultures, their value as a social and emotional strength is universally recognized [7].

Appreciation of Beauty and Excellence refers to the ability to notice and value beauty, skill, and moral goodness in various domains, including nature, art, science, and human behavior. It evokes emotions such as awe, wonder, and elevation, and contributes to a sense of connection with something greater than oneself. This strength is associated with openness to experience, increased prosocial behavior, and a deeper sense of meaning [7].

Together, these five strengths form the foundation of the transcendence virtue, enabling individuals to experience life with depth, meaning, and connection. They are not only conceptually linked but also empirically validated as contributors to well-being and human flourishing. Their development is influenced by cultural, social, and personal factors, and they can be nurtured through deliberate practice and supportive environments. Research has shown that transcendence strengths are among the most environmentally influenced and culturally endorsed traits, with humor and spirituality being particularly shaped by social context. Moreover, factor-analytic studies have confirmed the coherence of transcendence as a psychological construct, with these strengths clustering together in both adult and youth populations [7].

The inclusion of spirituality within this constellation underscores its integral role in the broader architecture of positive psychology. Rather than functioning in isolation, spirituality interacts dynamically with other transcendence strengths to support existential well-being, moral development, and a sense of connectedness. This multidimensional framework offers a robust foundation for understanding how individuals derive meaning and purpose, especially in contexts of adversity, transformation, and growth [2].

Spirituality and universalism are closely intertwined, both fostering values that extend beyond individual interests to embrace broader social and environmental concerns. While religiosity was primarily associated with conservation-oriented values—especially tradition—and showed no significant link to self-transcendence, spirituality demonstrated a modest association with conservation and a stronger connection to self-transcendence values such as benevolence and universalism. As a universal personality trait, spirituality reflects a concern for humanity and nature, suggesting its potential to promote environmental awareness and ethical engagement with sustainability. This distinction has important implications for sustainability research and policy, highlighting spirituality's role in supporting value systems aligned with ecological responsibility and global solidarity [8,9].

While the previous research does not directly link gratitude to universalism, we can infer a connection based on their shared emphasis on broader social and ethical concerns. Gratitude fosters positive social behaviors and well-being, which aligns with the principles of universalism that prioritize collective welfare and tolerance [10]. Moreover, experimental evidence supports the idea that gratitude enhances prosocial tendencies, further reinforcing its alignment with universalist values. Emmons and McCullough [11] found that individuals who engaged in daily gratitude exercises were significantly more likely to offer emotional support and help others with personal problems compared to control groups. These findings suggest that gratitude not only fosters individual well-being but also promotes concern for others, strengthening social bonds and encouraging altruistic behavior. Such outcomes resonate with the core principles of universalism, which emphasize empathy, social responsibility, and the welfare of others beyond the self.

The appreciation of beauty and the value of universalism are deeply interconnected within Schwartz's value theory. Both emphasize a communal and empathetic approach to life, fostering a shared appreciation of beauty in various forms. Appreciation of beauty along with engagement with natural and moral beauty, significantly predicts both self-reported and intended pro-environmental behavior [12].

Within the virtue of transcendence, character strengths such as hope and optimism play a critical role in fostering engagement with social and environmental causes. Hope is not merely a passive expectation but an active motivational force that sustains effort toward long-term goals, even in the face of uncertainty. Optimism has been shown to increase willingness to address global warming and engage in conservation efforts, suggesting that it can motivate individuals to take action for the common good [13]. According to Jiga-Boy et al. [4], values influence behavior through a process of activation, interpretation, and goal alignment. When hope and optimism are aligned with self-transcendent values, they enhance the perceived efficacy and moral worth of sustainable actions.

Humor, when aligned with virtues such as transcendence, can also serve a moral good, promoting social warmth, cohesion, and competence. This aligns with the universalism value, which seeks the well-being of others. Moreover, humor can act as a social lubricant in sustainability communication, reducing resistance and fostering openness to behavioral change [14].

The United Nations' 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development articulates a transformative vision grounded in universal values such as dignity, equality, and environmental stewardship. These principles resonate strongly with the transcendence virtue identified in positive psychology. The Agenda's emphasis on "leaving no one behind" and fostering global solidarity aligns with character strengths such as gratitude, hope, and spirituality, which promote concern for others and a sense of connectedness beyond the self [3].

The objective of this study is to analyze the relationship between the various components of transcendence, as conceptualized within Seligman's virtues model, and the value of universalism as defined by Schwartz's theory of basic human values. Specifi-

cally, the study seeks to explore how transcendence strengths—such as gratitude, humor, hope/optimism, spirituality, and appreciation of beauty—are related with the goals of universalism (understanding, appreciation, and protection of all people and nature). To guide this inquiry, the study addresses the following research questions:

(1) To what extent are transcendence strengths—gratitude, humor, hope/optimism, spirituality, and appreciation of beauty—associated with the value of universalism among university students?

(2) Which specific transcendence strengths serve as significant predictors of universalism's goals: understanding, appreciation, and protection of all people and nature?

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Participants

The inclusion criteria for participation in the study were: being a first-year university student, residing in Spain, and providing informed consent. Individuals with any illness or condition that could hinder comprehension of the survey items were excluded.

2.2. Variables and Instruments

Sociodemographic variables. The sociodemographic variables included in the study were sex (male and female), age, university of enrollment, and academic degree program.

Transcendence. We used the short form of the Values in Action Inventory of Strengths VIA-72 developed by Peterson & Seligman [7] and for Spanish-speaking populations by Azañedo et al. [15]. This instrument consists of 72 items that measure 24 character strengths, grouped under six core virtues. The transcendence virtue includes five character strengths: spirituality, gratitude, hope/optimism, humor, and appreciation of beauty and excellence, each assessed through three items, totaling 15 items for this dimension.

Participants rated each item on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 0 ("very different from me") to 4 ("very similar to me"), indicating how well each statement described them. For example, the spirituality subscale includes items such as "My beliefs give me comfort in difficult times", reflecting the role of personal faith or meaning-making in coping. Gratitude is captured through items like "I always express my thanks to people who care about me", emphasizing interpersonal appreciation. Hope and optimism are assessed with statements such as "I always look on the bright side of things", indicating a positive future orientation. Humor is represented by items like "I like to laugh and tease", highlighting the enjoyment of lightheartedness and social play. Finally, appreciation of beauty and excellence includes items such as "I notice beauty in nature, art, and people", reflecting sensitivity to aesthetic and moral excellence.

The transcendence scale demonstrated satisfactory internal consistency, with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.781, supporting its reliability for use in psychological and behavioral research.

Universalism. We used the Universalism subscale of the Portrait Values Questionnaire-IV (PVQ-IV) developed by Schwartz within his theory of basic human values. This subscale comprises six items designed to capture the value of universalism, which reflects concern for the welfare of all people and for nature, as well as a commitment to equality, justice, and environmental sustainability [16].

In the PVQ-IV, participants were presented with short verbal portraits of hypothetical individuals and asked to rate how similar they were to each person described, using a six-point Likert scale ranging from 0 ("not like me at all") to 5 ("very much like me"). For instance, one item reads: "He thinks it is important that every person in the world be treated equally. He wants justice for everybody, even for people he doesn't know", reflecting a strong orientation toward social justice. Another item states: "She strongly believes that people should care for nature. Looking after the environment is important to

her", emphasizing ecological concern. A third example is: "He wants everyone to be treated with respect and dignity, regardless of their background", illustrating a commitment to human rights and inclusivity.

The Universalism subscale demonstrated acceptable psychometric properties, with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.718, indicating adequate reliability for assessing value orientations in diverse populations.

2.3. Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics were calculated for each transcendence strength to contextualize their relative influence on universalistic values.

Pearson correlations were conducted to examine the relationships among transcendence strengths and the value of universalism.

A stepwise regression analysis was performed to evaluate the predictive power of transcendence strengths—namely gratitude, humor, hope/optimism, spirituality, and appreciation of beauty—on the value of universalism. Prior to interpreting the regression results, collinearity diagnostics were performed to assess potential multicollinearity among the predictor variables, ensuring the robustness and interpretability of the model. The decision to use stepwise multiple regression was based on both theoretical and empirical considerations. While alternative modeling strategies such as hierarchical regression and structural equation modeling (SEM) were considered, stepwise regression was selected for its ability to identify the most parsimonious set of predictors that contribute significantly to the outcome variable—in this case, universalism. This approach was particularly suitable given the exploratory nature of the study. Stepwise regression allowed us to assess the incremental contribution of each character strength while controlling for multicollinearity and avoiding overfitting. The statistical package SPSS 30 was used to do the analysis.

3. Results

A total of 1240 university students participated in the study. The mean age was 19.18 years (SD = 3.59). Of the sample, 67.02% identified as female (N = 833) and 32.8% as male (N = 407). Participants were recruited from five universities located in distinct regions of Spain: 53.1% from Madrid (N = 658), 21.40% from Barcelona (N = 265), 16% from Valencia (N = 198), 4.5% from Sevilla (N = 56), and 5% from Vigo (N = 62). One participant (0.1%) did not specify their location.

Academic disciplines pursued by participants were categorized as follows: 32.26% were enrolled in programs related to Social Sciences and Law, 27.34% in Health Sciences, 22.58% in Education and Social Sciences, 10.80% in Arts and Humanities, 5.0% in Science and Technology, and 2.02% in other fields.

The mean scores and standard deviations for each transcendence strength were as follows: spirituality (M = 8.46, SD = 2.13), appreciation of beauty (M = 8.59, SD = 2.47), gratitude (M = 8.12, SD = 2.22), humor (M = 7.21, SD = 2.34), and optimism (M = 8.25, SD = 2.26). These values indicate that appreciation of beauty and spirituality were the most highly endorsed strengths among participants, while humor showed the lowest mean score.

All Pearson correlations among transcendence strengths and the value of universalism were positive and statistically significant (see Table 1).

Collinearity diagnostics were performed to evaluate the independence of the predictor variables—gratitude, humor, hope/optimism, spirituality, and appreciation of beauty—in the regression model. The analysis revealed that the condition indices remained below the commonly accepted threshold of 30, with the highest observed value, approximately 12.96. Additionally, the variance proportions were well distributed across dimensions, with no indication of variance inflation concentrated in a single component. These results confirm

that multicollinearity is not present among the predictors, supporting the robustness and interpretability of the regression model.

Table 1. Pearson Correlation Matrix of Transcendence Strengths and Universalism.

	Universalism	Spirituality	Appreciation of Beauty	Gratitude	Humor	Hope/Optimism
Universalism	---					
Spirituality	0.300 ***	---				
Appreciation of beauty P	0.342 ***	0.342 ***	---			
Gratitude	0.343 ***	0.423 ***	0.290 ***	---		
Humor	0.238 ***	0.293 ***	0.377 ***	0.377 ***	---	
Hope/Optimism	0.320 ***	0.494 ***	0.337 ***	0.447 ***	0.266 ***	---

Note: All correlations are significant at *** $p < 0.001$.

The final regression model, which included gratitude, appreciation of beauty, hope/optimism, and spirituality, accounted for 20.1% of the variance in universalism. Notably, humor was excluded from the final model, suggesting that it did not exhibit a statistically significant association with universalism in this context. Effect sizes (Cohen's f^2) ranged from 0.133 (gratitude) to 0.252 (spirituality), indicating medium to large contributions to the model. Interestingly, spirituality showed the largest effect size despite having the lowest standardized beta (β = 0.087), suggesting that its impact may be more structural than direct. The 95% confidence intervals for the unstandardized coefficients further support the robustness of these effects, as all intervals exclude zero, indicating that each predictor contributes significantly to the model. These findings highlight the nuanced role of character strengths in shaping universalist values (see Table 2).

Table 2. Stepwise multiple regression of universalism.

	β	95% CI for B	F	Adjusted R^2	Effect Size (f^2)
Gratitude	0.190	[0.047, 0.087]	164.589 ***	0.117	0.133
Appreciation of beauty	0.217	[0.055, 0.091]	137.398 ***	0.180	0.220
Hope/Optimism	0.119	[0.019, 0.063]	101.987 ***	0.196	0.244
Spirituality	0.087	[0.010, 0.054]	78.904 ***	0.201	0.252

*** $p < 0.001$.

4. Discussion

The findings of this study provide empirical support for the theoretical proposition that transcendence strengths are positively associated with the value of universalism, as conceptualized in Schwartz's theory of basic human values [2]. The final regression model, which included gratitude, appreciation of beauty, hope/optimism, and spirituality, accounted for 20.1% of the variance in universalism, suggesting that these character strengths contribute meaningfully to the development of ethical orientations that transcend individual interests and promote concern for the welfare of others and the natural world.

The results of the collinearity diagnostics provide empirical support for the conceptual distinction between the virtue of transcendence and Schwartz's value of universalism. These findings suggest that the components of transcendence, as defined by Peterson and Seligman [7], represent distinct psychological constructs rather than overlapping expressions of a single value domain. Importantly, Peterson and Seligman explicitly associate

the value of universalism with the character strengths of perspective and fairness—both of which are classified under the virtue of justice—not with any of the strengths included in transcendence. Peterson and Seligman highlight a conceptual distinction between their classification of character strengths—particularly the virtue of transcendence—and Schwartz's model of universal values. Schwartz and colleagues identified ten universally recognized value domains derived from basic human and societal needs. While values and virtues are not synonymous, Peterson and Seligman argue that virtues embody values when they become habitual patterns of behavior. Notably, they point out that Schwartz's inclusion of hedonism as a universal value reflects a biological emphasis that diverges from their own conceptualization of character strengths, which does not prioritize pleasure per se. Furthermore, Schwartz's circumplex model, which organizes values along dimensions of individual versus collective interests and instrumental versus terminal goals, offers a structural framework that differs from the hierarchical approach proposed by Peterson and Seligman. This distinction underscores the differing theoretical orientations: Schwartz's universalism is rooted in sociobiological imperatives, whereas transcendence in Peterson and Seligman's framework reflects a more aspirational and meaning-oriented dimension of human character [7].

Beyond their statistical association with universalism, transcendence strengths serve as psychological drivers of ethical and ecological engagement. Traits such as gratitude, hope, spirituality, and appreciation of beauty not only reflect internal dispositions but actively shape individuals' moral reasoning and behavioral intentions. As Schwartz [1] suggests, values function as guiding principles that influence judgments and actions; in this light, transcendence strengths can be understood as motivational mechanisms that translate universalistic values into concrete practices oriented toward social justice and environmental stewardship. By fostering empathy, prosocial motivation, and a sense of connectedness with nature and humanity, transcendence strengths mobilize students toward sustainable action and global solidarity.

The predictive role of spirituality in this study is particularly noteworthy. Although spirituality was excluded from Schwartz's original value taxonomy due to cross-cultural inconsistencies, it remains conceptually embedded within universalism and benevolence [2]. Our findings support recent research suggesting that spirituality fosters ecological awareness and global solidarity [8], and contributes to existential well-being and moral development [7]. Piotrowski and Żemojtel-Piotrowska [8] suggest spirituality's association with ecological awareness and moral development, distinguishing it from religiosity, which tends to correlate with conservation-oriented values. Spirituality fosters a sense of connectedness with all living beings, supporting the development of moral identity and global empathy.

This connection is evident in emotional experiences such as awe and elevation, which often arise in response to nature and moral beauty. These experiences, as noted by Peterson and Seligman [7], contribute to existential well-being and reinforce the ethical imperative to care for others and the planet [1,9]. Spirituality and universalism share a self-transcendent orientation. Spirituality fosters a sense of interconnectedness with all living beings and the cosmos, which is foundational to universalistic values. This connection is evident in the emotional experiences associated with spirituality—such as awe or elevation—which often arise in response to nature, moral beauty, and human excellence. These experiences promote prosocial behavior, empathy, and a sense of stewardship toward the environment. Spirituality promotes a worldview that transcends individual interests, fosters compassion and ecological awareness, and supports the development of moral identity and global responsibility [7].

Hope/optimism also contributed significantly to universalism, reinforcing the notion that positive future-oriented emotions can motivate engagement with social and environmental causes [13]. Hope sustains goal-directed behavior and resilience, which are essential for addressing complex global issues such as climate change, inequality, and biodiversity loss. This finding is consistent with the broader literature on psychological capital and its role in promoting sustainable behavior [17]. According to previous research [7], hope and optimism exhibit a strong conceptual alignment with universalistic values, particularly through their capacity to inspire concern for the welfare of others and the planet. Peterson and Seligman describe "big optimism" as a generalized expectation that transcends personal goals, encompassing visions of societal progress and global flourishing—such as the belief that our nation is on the verge of something great. This form of optimism is exemplified by moral leaders like Martin Luther King Jr., Nelson Mandela, Pope Franciscus, and the Dalai Lama, whose hopeful visions galvanized movements for justice, peace, and environmental stewardship. Moreover, hope is linked to other transcendence strengths such as appreciation of beauty and excellence, which fosters awe and reverence for nature, and spirituality, which connects individuals to universal moral ideals. These interconnections suggest that hope and optimism may serve as psychological catalysts for universalism, encouraging individuals to engage with complex global challenges—such as climate change, inequality, and biodiversity loss—with sustained effort and moral conviction.

The strength of appreciation of beauty as a predictor of universalism is consistent with recent studies demonstrating its role in fostering moral elevation and pro-environmental behavior [12]. Appreciation of beauty, particularly in its natural and moral dimensions, appears to cultivate a sense of awe and connectedness that transcends self-interest and promotes ecological sensitivity. This supports the idea that aesthetic engagement is not merely a personal experience but a pathway to ethical concern and global empathy. Moreover, previous research [6] discusses the role of altruism—both toward other humans and the biosphere—in facilitating collective action and sustainable governance of common-pool resources. This dual form of altruism corresponds closely with Schwartz's conceptualization of universalism and is reflected in the transcendence strengths examined in this study. These strengths can thus be seen as psychological mechanisms that support altruistic orientations, which are essential for addressing collective environmental challenges such as climate change and biodiversity loss.

Gratitude also emerged as a significant predictor of universalism. Although gratitude is not explicitly included in Schwartz's value taxonomy, its psychological functions align closely with the principles of universalism. This finding aligns with psychological research indicating that gratitude enhances prosocial behavior, empathy, and interpersonal trust [10]. Emmons and McCullough [11] also demonstrated that gratitude not only enhances subjective well-being but serves as a psychological mechanism that strengthens interpersonal relationships and prosocial motivation. Participants who engaged in gratitude exercises reported greater emotional support toward others, increased helping behavior, and stronger feelings of social connectedness. These effects were consistent even among individuals with chronic illness, suggesting that gratitude fosters concern for others regardless of personal circumstances. Moreover, their mediational analyses revealed that gratitude fully mediated the relationship between the intervention and positive affect, indicating that gratitude itself—not merely general positivity—was responsible for the observed prosocial outcomes. These findings reinforce the conceptual alignment between gratitude and universalism, as both promote empathy, altruism, and a sense of moral obligation toward the welfare of others and the broader community.

Peterson and Seligman [7] argue that psychological functions of gratitude—such as fostering empathy, inhibiting aggression, and reinforcing social cohesion—make it a natu-

ral complement to universalistic values. Moreover, gratitude is portrayed as a corrective virtue, counteracting entitlement and self-centeredness, and encouraging individuals to recognize their interdependence with others and the broader world. This recognition is foundational to universalism, which requires an awareness of shared humanity and ecological interconnectedness. Peterson and Seligman also note that gratitude is associated with humility and perspective—strengths that are directly linked to universalism in their classification—suggesting that gratitude may indirectly support universalistic orientations through its influence on related character traits. In addition, gratitude is cultivated through cultural rituals and institutions that emphasize collective memory, moral reflection, and social responsibility. These practices reinforce the idea that gratitude is not merely a private sentiment but a socially embedded virtue that contributes to the moral fabric of communities. By promoting interpersonal trust, civic engagement, and ecological stewardship, gratitude serves as a psychological bridge between personal virtues and societal values, reinforcing the moral foundations of universalism and motivating care for others and the natural world. In this regard, Gulliford and Morgan [10] emphasize that gratitude should be understood not merely as a personal disposition, but as a socially embedded moral resource that contributes to the cultivation of global citizenship and ethical engagement with sustainability. Its pedagogical significance is particularly noteworthy, as gratitude education—when framed as a virtue rather than a mood-enhancing technique—can foster critical moral reflection, promote awareness of social and ecological interdependence, and strengthen students' commitment to justice, equity, and environmental stewardship.

Interestingly, humor did not emerge as a significant predictor in the final regression model. Although humor is widely recognized for its contribution to psychological well-being and social bonding [18], its ethical relevance appears to be contingent upon its moral orientation and contextual application [14]. Müller and Ruch propose that humor may act as a social facilitator in sustainability discourse, helping to reduce resistance and foster openness to behavioral change. However, its classification within the VIA framework remains debated, and its motivational alignment may diverge from other transcendence strengths that are more directly associated with ethical and ecological concerns. Moreover, humor's emotional valence and social function can vary significantly across cultures and individual differences, potentially limiting its predictive power in relation to universalistic values. Future research should investigate whether specific humor styles—such as affiliative, self-transcendent, or moral humor—are more conducive to fostering values aligned with global empathy and environmental responsibility.

Moreover, in the Spanish validation of the VIA questionnaire by Azañedo et al. [15], humor was not classified within the transcendence strengths but rather grouped under the category of emotional strengths. This empirical reallocation may help explain its exclusion from the final regression model in the present study, as its motivational orientation might differ from the other transcendence-related traits more directly linked to ethical and ecological concern. Future research could explore whether specific types of humor—such as affiliative, self-transcendent, or moral humor—are more closely aligned with universalistic values.

Although humor is classified by Peterson and Seligman [7] as a character strength under the virtue of transcendence, its conceptual alignment with universalism appears limited. Universalism, as defined in Schwartz's value theory, emphasizes concern for the welfare of all people and nature, grounded in empathy, tolerance, and moral responsibility. In contrast, humor is primarily described by Peterson and Seligman as a strength that connects individuals to the "irony of the human condition," offering comfort, amusement, and perspective through playful engagement with life's contradictions. Moreover, Peterson and Seligman [7] acknowledge that humor is the most controversially placed strength in

their taxonomy and may be better understood as a "value-added" trait—enhancing other strengths such as leadership or social intelligence—rather than as a standalone moral virtue. Its expression varies widely across cultures, and its moral valence depends on context and intent, ranging from benevolent playfulness to aggressive mockery. These features suggest that humor, although widely valued and culturally pervasive, does not directly support the universalistic goals of social justice, ecological stewardship, or global solidarity, and may therefore lack a substantive conceptual link to universalism.

These findings have important implications for educational practice and sustainability policy. Promoting transcendence strengths within university curricula may foster ethical awareness, global solidarity, and ecological responsibility among students. Character education programs that emphasize gratitude, hope, spirituality, and appreciation of beauty could serve as effective tools for cultivating values aligned with the SDGs and for preparing students to engage with the ethical dimensions of sustainability. Embedding these strengths into teacher training programs supports a shift from content-based instruction to value-based education that prepares learners for the complexities of sustainable development according to UNESCO in 2020 [19]. Emerging evidence underscores the importance of psychological strengths in mitigating the physiological impact of chronic stress [20]. These findings suggest that internal psychological resources—akin to transcendence strengths—may buffer individuals against the adverse effects of stress, promoting both physical and emotional resilience. In educational contexts, fostering such strengths may not only enhance students' ethical engagement but also support their well-being in the face of global challenges such as climate anxiety, social injustice, and ecological degradation.

The near-universal prioritization of values such as universalism across societies suggests that these values are deeply rooted in human nature and social functioning [2]. Universalism, defined by goals such as understanding, tolerance, and protection of all people and nature, reflects a motivational orientation that aligns closely with the ethical foundation of sustainability. As Jiga-Boy et al. [4] argue, values such as universalism provide a moral and motivational basis for transformative change, particularly in the context of global challenges addressed by the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals [3].

Goal 4 of the SDGs—ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education—calls for the promotion of global citizenship, human rights, and sustainable lifestyles. This aligns with the development of transcendence strengths, which foster moral elevation, ecological awareness, and prosocial behavior. Higher education and teacher training programs can integrate character education focused on spirituality, gratitude, and appreciation of beauty through reflective practices and community-based learning. These approaches help future educators cultivate values that support sustainability and empower students to engage ethically with global challenges [3].

The Agenda's call for "universal respect for human rights and human dignity" and its commitment to fostering peaceful, inclusive societies (Goal 16) underscore the relevance of spirituality as a transcendence strength. Spirituality, understood as a connection to something greater than oneself, supports the development of global empathy and moral responsibility—qualities essential for addressing complex issues such as inequality, climate change, and biodiversity loss. The SDGs' emphasis on partnership and shared responsibility (Goal 17) further highlights the need for values that transcend individual interests, suggesting that spirituality can play a pivotal role in mobilizing collective action for sustainable development [3].

Transcendence strengths—particularly hope, gratitude, and spirituality—can serve as foundational elements in such pedagogy, enhancing educators' ability to guide students toward ethical reflection and global citizenship. Embedding these strengths into teacher training programs supports UNESCO's call for a shift from content-based instruction to

value-based education that prepares learners for the complexities of sustainable development [19], pp. 30–31. Strengths such as hope and optimism are particularly relevant in mobilizing youth to address climate challenges and social inequalities. By integrating these traits into educational practice, institutions can support UNESCO's vision of youth-led transformation and intergenerational dialogue for sustainability [19], pp. 32–33. Other transcendence strengths, especially gratitude and appreciation of beauty, can be cultivated through community engagement and place-based education. These strengths encourage students to connect with their surroundings, recognize interdependence, and act with compassion toward both people and nature. Educational initiatives that integrate local sustainability challenges with character development align with UNESCO's recommendation to treat communities as "learning laboratories" for sustainable development [19], p. 34.

Previous research also highlights the importance of values activation, noting that values influence behavior more strongly when they are made salient in relevant contexts. Educational environments that frame sustainability issues in terms of fairness, justice, and global solidarity may activate transcendence strengths and universalistic values among students [6]. This suggests that pedagogical strategies should not only teach about environmental issues but also engage students' moral and emotional capacities. By aligning educational content with students' transcendence strengths, institutions can enhance the motivational salience of sustainability and foster deeper ethical commitment.

The present study focuses on the virtue of transcendence. It is essential to distinguish between spirituality and religiosity in their respective relationships with universalism [8]. Religiosity is often associated with higher importance placed on benevolence values. This is evident across various studies, which show that religious individuals tend to prioritize values that promote the welfare of others within their immediate social groups or communities. Conversely, religiosity tends to correlate negatively with universalism values. Universalism involves a broader concern for the welfare of all people and the environment, transcending immediate social groups. Studies indicate that religious individuals often place less importance on universalism compared to non-religious individuals [9].

Nevertheless, this study presents several limitations. First, its cross-sectional design precludes causal inferences; future research should consider longitudinal approaches to examine the developmental trajectories of transcendence strengths and universalistic values. Moreover, the directionality of the relationship remains uncertain. It is plausible that individuals who already endorse universalistic values may be more inclined to cultivate transcendence strengths such as gratitude, hope, and spirituality, just as these strengths may foster universalistic orientations. This bidirectional dynamic suggests that the relationship may not be unidirectional, and highlights the need for longitudinal research to clarify the temporal and causal mechanisms underlying these associations.

Second, the sample is restricted to Spanish university students, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other educational contexts. Education level was generally a weak predictor of strength scores [21]; however, expanding the sample to include individuals from other educational levels—such as secondary education or vocational training—would enhance the generalizability of the findings. Broader sampling could help determine whether the observed associations between transcendence strengths and universalistic values hold across different stages of educational development. Although the sample includes participants from five geographically diverse universities and reflects the typical age range of undergraduate students in Spain, it slightly overrepresents female students (67.02%) compared to national averages, where women constitute 56% of the undergraduate university population [22]. This gender imbalance, while common in certain academic disciplines, should be considered when interpreting the results, particularly in relation to psychological traits that may vary by gender. Future research should aim to

replicate these findings in more gender-balanced and internationally diverse samples to enhance external validity. Nevertheless, differences between female and male respondents in the measurement of character strengths were generally modest [21].

A third limitation of the study is that all participants were Spanish nationals. This may restrict the generalizability of the findings, particularly given that previous studies using the VIA with university students from non-Spanish backgrounds have reported considerable cross-loadings for items within the final factor of transcendence, suggesting potential cultural influences on the factorial structure of the instrument. A comparative study between British and Iranian university students found no significant differences in transcendence strengths such as gratitude, appreciation of beauty, hope/optimism, or humor—only in spirituality, where, contrary to expectations, British participants scored significantly higher than their Iranian counterparts [23].

Fourth, the study relied exclusively on quantitative methods, which may not fully capture the complexity and subjective dimensions of transcendence. Incorporating qualitative approaches in future research could provide deeper insights into the lived experiences of transcendence and its role in shaping ethical and environmental engagement. The study relied on self-report measures, which may be subject to social desirability bias or inaccuracies in self-perception. Although validated instruments were used, future research should consider incorporating behavioral or observational data to complement self-reported responses and enhance validity. Nonetheless, self-report questionnaires remain a widely accepted method in psychological research, particularly for assessing internal traits such as character strengths and personal values, which are difficult to observe directly. Their use allows for standardized data collection across large samples and facilitates comparisons across studies [21]. Further investigations might also examine the interplay among different virtues within the VIA framework, such as justice, humanity, or wisdom, and their potential contributions to universalism. Exploring mediating or moderating mechanisms—such as empathy, moral identity, or environmental concern—could enhance our understanding of how character strengths influence value orientations and behavior. Moreover, cross-cultural studies could help clarify the universality of these relationships and identify cultural factors that shape the expression of transcendence and universalism.

While the findings suggest a meaningful association between transcendence strengths and universalistic values, it is important to adopt a more critical stance regarding the interpretation of these results. The assumption that these strengths inherently promote sustainability may overlook alternative explanations or confounding variables. For instance, factors such as religious education [8,9], institutional culture [2,4], or prior social engagement [24] could also influence students' ethical orientations and ecological awareness. These contextual influences may shape the development and expression of transcendence strengths, thereby complicating the causal interpretation of their relationship with universalism. Future research should consider these variables to better understand the mechanisms underlying these associations.

5. Conclusions

The present study demonstrates that transcendence strengths—particularly gratitude, appreciation of beauty, hope/optimism, and spirituality—are positively associated with the value of universalism, which reflects concern for the welfare of all people and nature. These strengths not only correlate with universalistic orientations but also function as psychological drivers of ethical and ecological engagement. By fostering empathy, resilience, and a sense of connectedness, transcendence strengths contribute meaningfully to students' moral development and their capacity to act in alignment with global values.

The value of universalism, as explored in this study, provides a motivational foundation for the holistic vision of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which integrate economic, social, and environmental dimensions. Transcendence strengths such as hope and optimism may enhance students' perceived efficacy in contributing to these goals, while appreciation of beauty can deepen their engagement with ecological and cultural diversity. Spirituality, understood as both existential meaning and personal agency, further reinforces students' commitment to justice, compassion, and sustainability.

By cultivating transcendence strengths in educational contexts, universities can contribute to the ethical infrastructure necessary for achieving the SDGs, particularly those related to peace, justice, and environmental sustainability. These findings support the integration of character education into sustainability discourse and highlight the transformative potential of transcendence-based pedagogy in preparing students for responsible global citizenship.

Author Contributions: J.L. wrote the draft of the manuscript and conducted the data analysis. C.N., M.O.-A. and G.S.-M. critically revised the manuscript for important intellectual contributions. C.N., M.O.-A. and G.S.-M. designed the study and collected and prepared the data. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research was funded by CEU San Pablo University, grant number (PPC23CN).

Institutional Review Board Statement: The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki, and approved by the CEU San Pablo University Ethics Research Committee approved the study (757/23/80).

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: Data available on Open Science Framework repository: https://osf.io/dnzsm/?view_only=cce05ab69c54416f849d227c180c3882 (accessed on 1 October 2025).

Acknowledgments: We extend our sincere gratitude to all the university students who generously participated in this study. Their willingness to share personal insights and experiences was essential to the success of our research. Without their thoughtful engagement and commitment, this investigation into transcendence strengths and universalistic values would not have been possible. We deeply appreciate their contribution to advancing knowledge in the fields of positive psychology and sustainability education.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used in this manuscript:

M	Mean
SD	Standard Deviation
p	*p*-value
Adjusted R^2	Adjusted coefficient of determination
β (Beta)	Standardized regression coefficient
F	F-statistic
MDPI	Multidisciplinary Digital Publishing Institute
PVQ-IV	Portrait Values Questionnaire-IV
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
VIA	Values in Action

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