More personal values, better soft skills:
An explorative study with a group of Italian university students

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Abstract

We live in a complex social world characterized by high levels of job insecurity and ever-changing work trends. In this context, hard skills alone are not enough to be hired and promoted, and soft skills have become a "must-have" for students and job seekers. Several research highlighted the positive role of some active learning methods in developing soft skills such as service-learning. However, personal characteristics might make people prone to be more skilled in specific areas than others. Thus, the present study aims to investigate the association between personal values and soft skills in a group of Italian university students. Two hundred forty-eight university students (women = 79.0%; Mage = 22.96, SD = 3.23) took part in the study. Participants completed the Portrait Values Questionnaire and the ERASMUS+K2 eLene4work Scale. Path analysis findings show several associations between the study's variables. Personal-focused values are mainly associated with intrapersonal soft skills, while social-focused values are primarily related to interpersonal soft skills.

Further significant relationships between values and soft skills emerge, especially in the case of openness to change and self-transcendence values. Limitations of the study, future research developments, and practical implications of the results are discussed.

Keywords: soft skills; personal values; university students; path analysis

Introduction

We live in a world characterized by high levels of interconnection and interdependency among people, institutions, and cultures, and high levels of complexity, insecurity, and tensions (UNESCO, 2015). These conditions have led to an ever-changing society in which people are required to exhibit a never-ending adjustment (Nagy et al., 2019; Russo et al., 2021a). Not surprisingly, the workforce trends are also changing significantly, leading to a job market that is becoming increasingly competitive (Chirumbolo et al., 2021; Schulz, 2008). In this scenario, employers are likely to hire, retain, and promote people who demonstrate a positive attitude towards changes, who are dependable, willing to keep on learning, well-organized, are good communicators, and so on (Majid et al., 2012; Wats & Wats, 2009). This is especially true in the Italian context, where the present study was carried out, because high levels of unemployability among young adults have made it necessary for them to acquire new skills to be more appealing than other candidates (Gavriluță et al., 2022). Thus, compared to the past when technical and professional skills were considered the only skills that mattered, hard skills alone are no longer enough to reach high-status careers today (Mitchell et al., 2010; Schulz, 2008). Moreover, economists state that hard abilities like intelligence quotient account for only 20% of employment outcomes and other skills drive job success (Kyllonen, 2013; Levin, 2012). Consistently, research has shown that success in life depends not on the "general knowledge" achieved through school, but rather on other factors such as conscientiousness and curiosity (see Heckman & Kautz, 2012 for a review). Based on this evidence, the European Commission (2018) has recently recommended reforming school and university curricula to find teaching strategies that may effectively educate students in both knowledge-based disciplines and the so-called soft skills (Cinque, 2016).

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To date, there is not clear definition of what soft skills are and what they are not, so much so that their meaning has been extensively debated in educational research (Chamorro-Premuzic et al., 2010). According to many scholars, the main challenge in finding a common definition is that some skills might be considered soft or hard based on specific areas of the job. For example, communication might be viewed as a soft skill for an electrical engineer but a technical skill for a journalist (Schulz, 2008). Moreover, during the last decade, soft skills have been termed "transversal skills" or "life skills" by several institutions such as the European Union (EU), the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), and the World Health Organization (WHO), leading to great confusion in the field. Touloumakos (2020) conducted a literature review and found that the term "soft skills" generally falls into one of 10 categories. These categories include, but are not limited to, elements ranging from qualities and values to other areas such as cognitive abilities or processes. Due to the lack of a clear and unique definition, soft skills have often been confused with or considered as part of other related constructs, such as personality traits, attitudes, beliefs, and values. However, soft skills represent individual competencies, and, as such, they require a "share of execution". Indeed, the element of action is implicitly or explicitly embedded into all the various definitions of soft skills found in the literature (Matteson et al., 2016). Moreover, although many personality features are significantly related to soft skills (e.g., Ciappei, 2015; Riggio et al., 2003), the correlation coefficients are always far from perfect, empirically suggesting that soft skills represent a unique construct.

Despite these issues, soft skills have truly gained traction in educational and work contexts (Cimatti, 2016) because studies show that highly soft-skilled individuals exhibit more energy, passion in their job, and career engagement (Aryani et al., 2021), as well as seem to be more protected from work-related diseases (e.g., burnout; Valieva, 2020).

According to the eLene4Work framework (2015-2018), which has been employed in the present study, soft skills could be defined as a combination of cognitive (e.g., skills related to the "general knowledge" a person has achieved; Heckman & Kautz, 2014) and metacognitive skills (e.g., skills related to grit, consciousness, trust, openness to experience, etc.; Kautz et al., 2014) that help people to adapt to the context in which they interact, managing personal, educational, and professional challenges (Cinque, 2016). Moreover, soft skills are essential to exercise an active and engaged citizenship, namely a citizenship based on democratic involvement that promotes social cohesion and sustainable behaviors (Arnold et al., 2020). The decision to

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adopt the eLene4Work framework for defining and measuring soft skills is based on two main reasons: first, this framework was developed starting from a comparative analysis of the state of the art. Second, it has been better defined by employing a multi-informant and cross-cultural perspective. Indeed, the authors investigated the meaning and the importance of soft skills relying on the point of view of university students, workers, teachers, and employers from 9 European Member States. Then, a related instrument to measure soft skills based on the final conceptualization has been developed (Uggeri et al., 2019). The eLene4Work framework clustered soft skills into three main categories: intrapersonal, interpersonal, and methodological. The first category includes the following basic skills: leadership (the ability to motivate and guide other persons), self-evaluation (the ability to be self-critical), adaptability, and flexibility (the ability to adapt quickly to new situations and contexts, exhibiting a flexible attitude). The second category includes communication (the ability to express one's ideas and opinions assertively, without prevaricating the views and opinions of others), teamwork (the ability to develop cooperative relationships, share knowledge and resources with others, and actively contribute to reaching the group's goals), conflict management (the ability to manage and resolve conflicts), and negotiation (the ability to conciliate different opinions in order to find a compromise). Finally, the third category includes learning to learn (the ability to evaluate own's knowledge and keep on learning by maintaining an open attitude), analytical skills (the ability to draw conclusions after getting an amount of information, establishing causal relationships), creativity and innovation (the ability to contribute with new improving ideas), and problem-solving (the ability to evaluate, select and implement solutions to solve problems).

Several studies have been carried out to assess the factors associated with the acquisition and strengthening of soft skills. Most of this research focuses on educational processes (e.g., Ahmad et al., 2019; Zhang et al., 2021) and teaching methods (e.g., England et al., 2020; Khan et al., 2017; Martin, 2019). Within formal education, Yorke and Knight (2004) explore two main approaches (parallel and embedded) to fostering the development of soft skills within educational institutions. The *parallel approach* provides students with activities focused on the development of specific soft skills, in the form of a parallel offering to the program curriculum (workshops, seminars, research, laboratory activities, group work, project work, etc.). On the other hand, the *embedded approach* is based on the premise that there is no difference between the way disciplinary content and soft skills are taught. The basic

assumption of this approach is that the development of soft skills cannot be separated from the processes of acquiring other knowledge or disciplinary competencies.

Among teaching methods, one that has demonstrated particularly efficacy in developing students' soft skills is service-learning (Bootsma et al., 2021; Culcasi et al., 2021; McNatt, 2020; West, 2017). This educational approach combines the learning dimension with community service to apply academic knowledge to address societal needs (Albanesi et al., 2023; Culcasi et al., 2021). Thus, students put what they learn in class into practice by engaging in community service activities, strengthening their knowledge, and acquiring personal, relational, and methodological skills that they otherwise could hardly learn in ordinary lectures (Culcasi & Venegas, 2023).

Moreover, previous findings have pointed out the critical role played by teachers' attitudes and their classroom management styles (Blazar & Kraft, 2017). However, as Schultz (2008) previously theorized, the development of some soft skills rather than others might also depend on personal characteristics. Accordingly, some studies have highlighted the existence of gender and age differences in soft skills, although the results are often inconsistent. Specifically, girls seem to be more prone to develop interpersonal skills than boys (Groves, 2005). Aryani et al. (2021) have pointed out that soft skills improve with age, even if their impact on psychological capital (i.e., internal resources that aid in managing challenging situations and enhancing wellbeing; Luthans et al., 2006) is stronger among high school and university students than employees. However, on the other side, some studies have shown that age does not have a consistent role in shaping soft skills (e.g., Garcia et al., 2020).

In line with Schultz's (2008) theorization, it is possible to hypothesize that personal values might represent another personal characteristic able to shape soft skills. Values are abstract concepts of what people hold to be worthy (Kluckhohn, 1951), and thus, they influence human choices, inclinations, and actions (Allport, 1961). Consistently, Evers et al. (1998) pointed out that soft skills are strongly associated not only with knowledge but also with values. More recently, the Portuguese Ministry of Education published 'Learner Profile', a document providing guidelines for teachers and educators that describe the 'portfolio' that the country wishes its students to achieve through education (Directorate-General for Education/Ministry of Education, 2018). This report focuses on several soft skills, such as communication and flexibility, but more interestingly, the Ministry of Education recognized that the core of these skills are values (Murcia Alvarez et al., 2021). According to the Theory

of Basic Human Values (Schwartz, 1992), which is the most well-known evidence-based theory on values (Brosch & Sander, 2015; Roccas & Sagiv, 2017), values are defined as relatively stable, trans-situational principles of what people consider important and desirable in their lives (Rokeach, 1973; Schwartz, 1992). Thus, values are considered a central aspect of people's identity (Barni, 2009; Hitlin & Piliavin, 2004), representing ideals deemed worthy of commitment as much as people depicting themselves in accordance with their value priorities (Hitlin, 2011). Values are the core of people's motivational system, guiding their perceptions, attitudes, inclinations, and behaviors (Roccas & Sagiv, 2017; Russo et al., 2019; Russo et al., 2022). Schwartz (1992, 2012) identified ten basic values. Each value is characterized by a specific motivational goal: (i) *power* (social status, dominance over people and resources), (ii) *achievement* (personal success according to social standards), (iii) *hedonism* (pleasure or sensuous gratification), (iv) *stimulation* (excitement, challenge, and novelty), (v) *self-direction* (independence of thought and action), (vi) *universalism* (understanding, tolerance, and concern for the welfare of all people and nature), (vii) *benevolence* (preserving and enhancing the welfare of people to whom one is close), (viii) *tradition* (respect and commitment to cultural or religious customs and ideas), (ix) *conformity* (restraint of actions that may harm others or violate social expectations), and (x) *security* (safety and stability of society, relationships, and the self). These values are interrelated, and their relations can be organized into a circular structure based on the congruence and the conflict among their underlying motivational goals (Fig. 1).
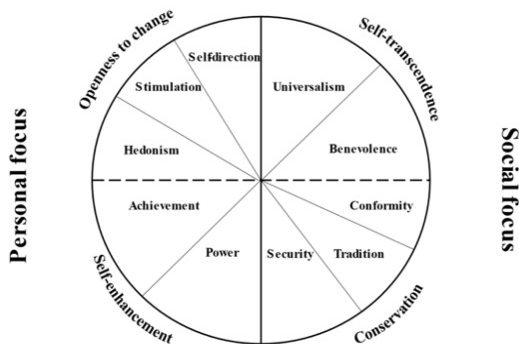

Fig. 1 - *Schwartz's Model of Values (1992, 2003, 2012)*

Values located close to each other in the circular structure share motivational goals (e.g., universalism and benevolence). Likewise, values located far away pursue conflicting motivational goals (e.g., benevolence and power). The relationships between values can also be summarized into a two-dimensional structure (Schwartz, 1992, 2012). The first dimension contrasts conservation values (i.e., tradition, conformity, and security), that emphasize self-restraint, preservation of traditional practices, and safeguarding of stability, as opposed to openness to change values (i.e., stimulation, hedonism, and self-direction), which instead emphasize the relevance of change, independence, and freedom. The second dimension opposes self-transcendence values (i.e., benevolence and universalism), that emphasize concern for the welfare and interests of others, to self-enhancement values (i.e., achievement and power), that emphasize the pursuit of one's interests, relative success and dominance over others. Finally, Schwartz (2012) categorizes these value dimensions based on their focus (personal *vs* social) and orientation (self-protective *vs* self-expansive). Accordingly, self-enhancement and openness to change values share a personal focus because they are mainly centred on achieving personal interests; while self-transcendence and conservation values share a social focus because they are mainly focused on managing relationships with others. Furthermore, self-enhancement and conservation share a self-protective orientation; while conservation values are oriented to avoid conflicts and maintain social order, self-enhancement values are oriented to actively achieve significant personal aims, looking over one's shoulder. On the other hand, openness to change and self-transcendence share a self-expansive orientation because they express anxiety-free motivations, promoting positive human development (Schwartz et al., 2012).

Several studies have highlighted that people in different occupations tend to prioritize different values (Ariza-Montes et al., 2017; Knafo & Sagiv, 2004; Tartakovsky & Cohen, 2014), and personal values are found to influence vocational interests and career choices (Knafo & Sagiv, 2004; Sagiv, 2002). Holland (1997) theorized the existence of six vocational interests: conventional interests (i.e., the preference for systematic and unambiguous tasks); artistic interests (i.e., the preference for free, ambiguous, unsystematic activities); investigative interests (i.e., the preference for systematic, symbolic, and creative investigation for abstract phenomenons); social interests (i.e., the preference for activities aimed at helping and guiding others); enterprising interests (i.e., the preference for activities aimed at leading and convincing others); and realistic interests (i.e., the preference for systematic manipulation of

objects, instruments or machines). Values and vocational interests are associated based on their compatibilities in terms of motivational goals (Arieli et al., 2020; Sagiv, 2002). For example, conservation values are more compatible with conventional vocational interests, whereas openness to change values are more related to artistic interests (Arieli et al., 2020).

Based on this evidence, it is possible to speculate that values might influence career paths, via their impact on specific soft skills that make people more self-efficacy in particular job roles than others. Previous studies have investigated the association between personal values and specific soft skills in employees, although the results are sometimes inconsistent. For example, a study by Sosik (2005) on interpersonal soft skills that involved 1,381 full-time corporate employees found that self-enhancement and self-transcendence values were positively related to leadership, in turn promoting managerial performance. However, a study by Prada-Ospina et al. (2020), that involved a group of 5,000 employees, did not find any significant association between values and leadership. In another study, Corneliussen et al. (2017) explored the link between values, intraindividual, and interindividual soft skills (based on adaptability and conflict resolution) in a group of 10 Danish soldiers deployed to stations in Greenland. Findings from this study showed that openness to change was related to adaptability, while self-transcendence values were positively associated with conflict management. Nevertheless, Sverdlik and Oreg (2009) pointed out that the link between values and adaptability following organizational changes is not unconditional, but depends on whether the change was chosen individually or imposed by the organization. In the former case, openness to change and conservation were positively and negatively associated with adaptability, respectively. In the latter case, however, the pattern was reversed: adaptability was more likely to be observed when conservation values were more important. In the category of interindividual soft skills, several studies focused on the link between personal values and teamwork, showing that cooperating attitudes and behaviors at the job were more compatible with self-transcendence values (Anjum et al., 2014; Arieli et al., 2020; Bond et al., 2004; Sagiv et al., 2011). It is also noteworthy that, in these studies, competition was mainly associated with self-enhancement values. Finally, considering the category of methodological skills, a recent study involving a group of 2,046 Russian and North Caucasians highlighted that openness to change and conservation values were positively and negatively related to creativity, respectively (Lebedeva et al., 2019).

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The present study

Based on the above considerations, the purpose of this study is to extend the earlier findings, analyzing the association between the personal values system and all the soft skills (intrapersonal, interpersonal, and methodological) in a group of university students, controlling for students' sex and age.

University students are trained to become future professionals. They make decisions on career paths during their years in education and reach the necessary abilities to be hired in that sector. Thus, understanding the links between values and soft skills could allow counselors to better orient students to jobs in line with their goals, vocations, and inclinations.

Although the present study adopts an explorative approach, it is possible to claim some hypotheses relied on motivational goals expressed by values. We hypothesize a positive association between self-enhancement, openness to change, and intrapersonal soft skills (H1). We also expect a positive association between conservation, self-transcendence, and interpersonal soft skills (H2). Based on Schwartz's (1992, 2012) statements, self-enhancement and openness to change values have a personal focus as they mainly regulate personal interests and desires. On the other hand, conservation and self-transcendence values share a social focus as they regulate the way people are socially related to others, relying on the principle of cooperation (Russo et al., 2022). Furthermore, we hypothesize that openness to change and self-transcendence values are also associated with methodological skills, that enable problem-solving through an approach of openness and flexibility (H3). Indeed, openness to change and self-transcendence are both considered "growth" values because they underlie self-expansive motivations (Russo et al., 2022; Russo et al., 2021b; Schwartz, 2012).

Materials and Methods

Participants and Procedure

Participants were two hundred forty-eight university students (79.0% women), aged from 18 to 38 years (M = 22.96, SD = 3.23), all living in Italy. Most of them were born in Italy (92.6%) and lived in the Center of Italy (77.5%). The majority of students attended a bachelor's degree in Human Nutrition Sciences (40.6%) or a master's degree in Psychology (44%).

Participants were recruited through the collaboration of their universities. Students were informed about the main objectives of the research and were advised that participation would be free and voluntary.

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Informed consent was also obtained from all participants involved in the study. Students who consented to take part in the study were asked to complete an anonymous questionnaire. The research protocol followed the ethical principles of the Declaration of Helsinki (1964) in its latest version (2013). The present study has been approved by the Ethical Committee of LUMSA University and follows the ethical guidelines for human research of the Italian Psychological Association (AIP; https://aipass.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/Codice-Etico_luglio-2022.pdf, consulted in May 2022). Additionally, one member of the research team had previously completed a training course 'Protecting Human Research Participants' by the National Institute for Health (Certification Number: 2868994).

Measures

Personal values. The Portrait Values Questionnaire–Short version (PVQ-21; Schwartz, 2003; Italian adaptation by Capanna et al., 2005) was used to assess students' personal values. The scale includes 21 portraits of a person, with his/her aspirations and goals that indirectly reflect the importance that people attribute to each basic value. The respondents' values are then inferred from their self-reported similarity (from 1 = "not like me at all" to 6 = "very much like me") to the people described. We computed four scores assessing the importance of the four higher-order value dimensions, namely: (i) conservation ($\alpha = 0.68$), (ii) openness to change ($\alpha = 0.68$), (iii) self-transcendence ($\alpha = 0.62$), and (iv) self-enhancement ($\alpha = 0.76$). An example of item is "Thinking up new ideas and being creative is important to him/her. He/She likes to do things in his/her own original way" (openness to change).

Soft skills. The ERASMUS+K2 eLene4work Scale (2015-2018) was used to assess students' perception of their soft skills. The scale is composed of 91 items set into 11 subscales which cover specific skills, such as (i) leadership ($\alpha = 0.83$), (ii) self-evaluation ($\alpha = 0.82$), (iii) adaptability and flexibility ($\alpha = 0.63$), (iv) communication ($\alpha = 0.73$), (v) teamwork ($\alpha = 0.79$), (vi) conflict management ($\alpha = 0.76$), (vii) negotiation ($\alpha = 0.71$), (viii) learning to learn ($\alpha = 0.84$), (ix) analytical skills ($\alpha = 0.87$), (x) creativity and innovation ($\alpha = 0.86$), and (xi) problem solving ($\alpha = 0.81$). Participants were asked to rate how capable they felt in each of the areas of competence on a scale ranging from 1 (not able at all) to 4 (very able). An example of item is: "During an argument, I always try to find a compromise" (conflict management).

Data Analysis

Preliminarily, we described the study's variables in terms of means, standard deviations, range, skewness, kurtosis, and linear correlational associations (Pearson's coefficients). A path analysis was then employed to explore the associations between personal values and soft skills. In the path analysis, the four value dimensions were treated as independent variables, the participant's age and sex (1 = males; 2 = females) as covariates, and soft skills as dependent variables (Fig. 2).
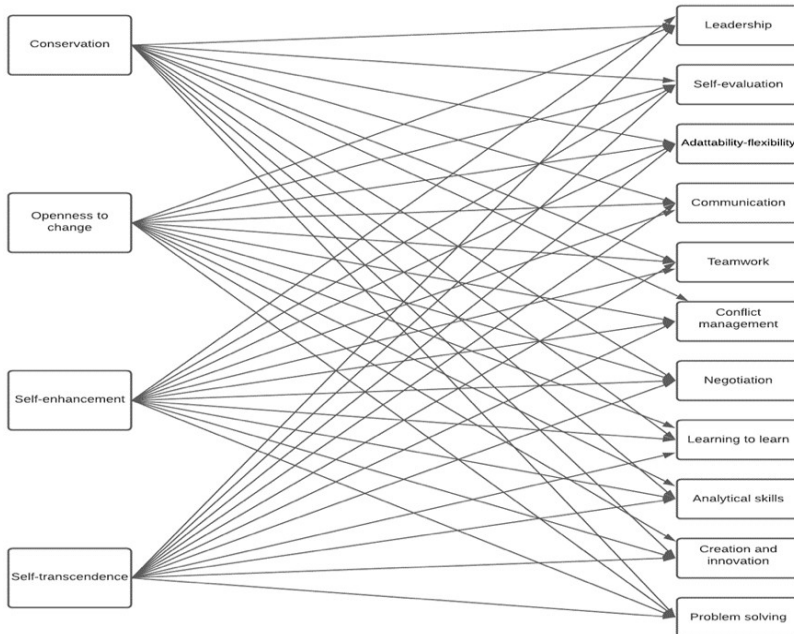
Fig. 2 - *Conceptual path model*

Since the data followed a normal distribution (see Tab.1) the Maximum Likelihood (ML) estimation was used. To verify the goodness-of-fit of the model, the following fit indices were used: The Chi-squared test (p-value > 0.05 indicates a good fit), the Comparative Fit Index (CFI), and the Non-normed Fit Index (TLI) (values > 0.90 indicate a good fit; values > 0.95 indicate a very good fit), the Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA), and the Standardised Root Means Square Residual (SRMR) (values < 0.08 indicate a good fit, values < 0.05 indicate a very good fit) (Kenny, 2015). Moreover, to

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explore the replicability of our results, we employed the standard bootstrap, whit a 95% confidence interval. Parameter estimates were based on 5000 bootstrap samples.

For descriptive and correlational analysis, we used SPSS-23. For the path analysis, we used Mplus-6.

Results

Descriptive statistics are reported in Table 1.

Tab 1 - *Descriptive statistics of the study's variables*

	Mean	Standard Deviation	Range	Skewness	Kurtosis
Personal values					
Conservation	3.71	0.84	1.50 – 5.83	-0.06	-0.44
Openness to change	4.29	0.78	2.17 – 6.00	-0.16	-0.33
Self-enhancement	3.32	1.03	1.25 – 6.00	0.18	-0.39
Self-transcendence	5.01	0.65	3.00 – 6.00	-0.67	0.18
Soft skills					
Leadership	3.07	0.49	1.38 – 4.00	-0.27	0.00
Self-evaluation	3.37	0.49	1.60 – 4.00	-0.51	-0.20
Adaptability and Flexibility	3.22	0.56	1.00 – 4.00	-0.32	0.03
Communication	3.17	0.35	2.17 – 4.00	0.05	-0.22
Teamwork	3.25	0.34	2.29 – 4.00	0.12	-0.37
Conflict management	3.29	0.35	2.20 – 4.00	-0.09	-0.57
Negotiation	3.14	0.46	1.50 – 4.00	-0.14	0.24
Learning to learn	3.34	0.38	2.33 – 4.00	-0.08	-0.86
Analytical skills	3.03	0.46	1.75 – 4.00	-0.02	-0.02
Creating and Innovation	2.98	0.57	1.20 – 4.00	-0.11	-0.11
Problem solving	3.22	0.42	2.13 -4.00	0.24	-0.76

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Among personal values, the highest mean scores were recorded for self-transcendence and openness to change values. Among soft skills, the highest mean scores were recorded for self-evaluation and learning to learn.

Table 2 shows the Pearson correlation coefficients between the study's variables.Strong associations emerge between values and soft skills in this study. Specifically, conservation is significantly and positively correlated with communication, teamwork, conflict management, learning to learn, and problem-solving. Openness to change and self-transcendence are significantly and positively associated with all the soft skills we analyzed. Finally, self-enhancement is significantly and positively associated with communication, leadership, self-evaluation, negotiation, and analytical skills.

The results of the path analysis are reported in Table 3.

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Tab 2 - *Bivariate correlations matrix of the study's variables*

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15
1. Conservation	-	0.09	0.17**	0.32**	0.09	0.07	0.09	.30**	0.25**	0.28**	0.07	0.17**	0.11	-0.01	0.13*
2. Openness to change		-	0.37**	0.25**	0.37**	0.29**	0.32**	0.31**	0.31**	0.21**	0.16**	0.30**	0.25**	0.38**	0.23**
3. Self-enhancement			-	-0.05	0.35**	0.15*	0.06	0.23**	0.07	-0.05	0.13*	0.11	0.18**	0.11	0.03
4. Self-transcendence				-	0.13*	0.22**	0.31**	0.35**	0.45**	0.40**	0.20**	0.24**	0.16**	0.18**	0.26**
5. Leadership					-	0.47**	0.27**	0.37**	0.47**	0.36**	0.35**	0.48**	0.55**	0.49**	0.43**
6.Self-evaluation						-	0.27**	0.38**	0.41**	0.35**	0.24**	0.63**	0.42**	0.30**	0.41**
7.Adattability-flexibility							-	0.30**	0.29**	0.31**	0.19**	0.41**	0.32**	0.39**	0.36**
8. Communication								-	0.52**	0.47**	0.32**	0.42**	0.43**	0.39**	0.44**
9. Teamwork									-	0.65**	0.49**	0.49**	0.42**	0.48**	0.51**
10.Conflict management										-	0.40**	0.50**	0.42**	0.35**	0.56**
11. Negotiation											-	0.30**	0.20**	0.45**	0.39**
12. Learning to learn												-	0.60**	0.43**	0.52**
13. Analytical skills													-	0.49**	0.51**
14.Creation and innovation														-	0.43**
15. Problem solving															-

Note. ** p<0.01; *p<0.05

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Tab 3 - *Path model results*

	Intrapersonal skills			Interpersonal skills				Methodological skills			
	Leadership	Self-evaluation	Adaptability and flexibility	Communication	Teamwork	Conflict management	Negotiation	Learning to learn	Analytical skills	Creation and innovation	Problem solving
Sex	0.05	0.14*	-0.07	-0.07	0.01	-0.04	-0.06	0.08	-0.03	-0.09	-0.04
	(-0.04, 0.14)	(0.04, 0.23)	(-0.17,0.04)	(-0.19, 0.03)	(-0.070.09)	(-0.13, 0.04)	(-0.16,0.03)	(-0.01, 0.18)	(-0.14,0.07)	(-0.20, 0.00)	(-0.13, 0.05)
Age	0.04	-0.12*	0.01	0.07	0.15**	0.09	0.00	-0.01	0.01	0.05	-0.09
	(-0.07, 0.14)	(-0.22,-0.02)	(-0.10, 0.11)	(-0.01, 0.17)	(0.06,0.24)	(-0.15, 0.18)	(-0.11, 0.11)	(-0.09, 0.07)	(-0.08, 0.11)	(-0.06, 0.16)	(-0.02, 0.20)
Conservation	-0.00	-0.01	-0.03	0.17**	0.12*	0.18**	-0.01	0.09	0.04	-0.05	0.07
	(-0.09, 0.09)	(-0.11, 0.11)	(-0.14, 0.08)	(0.07, 0.26)	(0.02, 0.21)	(0.08, 0.29)	(-0.11, 0.09)	(-0.01,0.20)	(-0.07, 0.15)	(-0.16, 0.04)	(-0.03, 0.17)
Openness to change	0.28**	0.21**	0.26**	0.20**	0.25**	0.21**	0.08	0.26**	0.19*	0.37**	0.22**
	(0.17, 0.37)	(0.08, 0.33)	(0.14, 0.36)	(0.08, 0.30)	(0.16, 0.34)	(0.11, 0.31)	(-0.03, 0.19)	(0.14, 0.37)	(0.06, 0.31)	(0.26, 0.46)	(0.10, 0.33)
Self-enhancement	0.24**	0.07	-0.03	0.14*	-0.02	-0.15*	0.09	-0.00	0.10	-0.02	-0.07
	(0.15, 0.34)	(-0.04, 0.19)	(-0.13,0.08)	(0.03, 0.24)	(-0.11, -0.07)	(-0.25, -0.24)	(-0.02, 0.21)	(-0.10, 0.11)	(-0.00, 0.21)	(-0.13, 0.09)	(-0.19, 0.04)
Self-transcendence	0.09	0.19*	0.25**	0.24**	0.33**	0.26**	0.18**	0.15*	0.13	0.10	0.17**
	(-0.02, 0.19)	(0.06, 0.31)	(0.14,0.37)	(0.13, 0.35)	(0.24, 0.44)	(0.15, 0.36)	(0.06, 0.28)	(0.03, 0.25)	(0.00,0.25)	(-0.01, 0.21)	(0.06, 0.27)

Note. In the Table the β coefficients and 5.000 bootstrap 95% IC are reported; **p<0.01, *p<0.05; Sex: 1 = males, 2 = females

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Overall, the path model showed a satisfactory fit to the data. Specifically, $\chi 2/df=13.87/8$, $p=0.08$; RMSEA=0.05; CFI =0.99; TLI=0.93; SRMR=0.02.

The inspection of β coefficients reveals that sex was positively related to self-evaluation; this suggests that women are more prone to report higher levels of self-evaluation than men. Moreover, age is negatively associated with self-evaluation and positively with teamwork. Among personal values, conservation is significantly and positively related to communication, teamwork, and conflict management. Openness to change is significantly and positively related to all soft skills except for negotiation. Self-enhancement is significantly and positively related to leadership and communication, and significantly and negatively associated with conflict management. Finally, self-transcendence was significantly and positively related to all intraindividual and interpersonal soft skills, except for leadership. Self-transcendence values are also significantly and positively related to learning to learn and problem-solving.

Discussion and Conclusion

Living in today's complex social world has made it essential for people, especially university students, to acquire sophisticated skills to be firstly hired after graduation, and then maintained and promoted for work (Majid et al., 2012; Schultz, 2008; Wats & Wats, 2009). Moreover, the uncertainties in the job market and evolving work trends have led to high levels of competition to the extent that hard and technical skills are considered "must-haves" but not sufficient to be noticed by employers (Gavriluță et al., 2022). In this context, soft skills have assumed more and more importance (Mitchell et al., 2010; Schultz, 2008). Indeed, the European Commission (2018) promoted a change in higher educational policies, requiring universities to pursue an integral education of students, including the teaching of soft skills. Consistently, several studies have investigated the factors that promote or are associated with soft skills (e.g., Ahmad et al., 2019; England et al., 2020; Khan et al., 2017; Martin, 2019; Zhang et al., 2021). Schultz (2008) observed that beyond teaching methods, personal characteristics might make people more prone to developing specific soft skills than others. Among these personal characteristics, a significant role is played by personal values (Directorate-General for Education/Ministry of Education, 2018; Evers et al., 1998), which represent the core of an individual's motivational system (Rokeach,

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1973; Schwartz, 1992). On this basis, the present study aims to analyzed the relationships between personal values and soft skills in a group of Italian university students.

This study's findings partially confirmed the initial hypotheses. Personal-focused values (e.g., self-enhancement and openness to change) are positively associated with some intrapersonal soft skills (H1). Specifically, self-enhancement is positively linked with leadership. People who endorse these values are typically driven by the need for power and success, likely making them more comfortable in leadership roles (Sosik, 2005). In the university context, professors often encourage students to show leadership in several ways. For example, they might be encouraged to assume a guiding role in group work and discussions or become a graduate representative (Wong et al., 2022). These roles are coherent with the motivational forces that underline self-enhancement values, namely the demonstration of one's own competencies and the attainment of a prestigious social status (Schwartz, 1992). Once they enter the world of work, these students may be more inclined to take on a leadership role. Considering work contexts, most leaders should pursue organizational interests first, even if it means going against the employees' needs. Leaders are also expected to influence the effectiveness of their employees and their organization (Yue et al., 2021). Thus, the motivational goals expressed by self-enhancement values (e.g., ambition, success, and power) are congruent with the tasks a leader is usually expected to manage (Sosik et al., 2005).

Interestingly, self-enhancement values are also positively and negatively related to communication and conflict management, respectively, which are defined as interpersonal skills. Effectively, leadership and communication are strongly related to each other, as much as some scholars state that leaders might be viewed as communication agents (Yue et al., 2021). Assuming a leadership style means being able to influence others. Thus, leaders, either in an educational or work context, are expected to be skilled communicators in order to strengthen relationships, build a common vision, and be acknowledged by others as leaders. Thus, communication can be viewed as a means to become a leader, reaching self-enhancement goals (i.e., power and success). On the other hand, conflict management skill entails that people handle and solve conflicts (Corneliussen et al., 2017), and, as such, it is in contrast with the competitive motivations expressed by self-enhancement values.

Considering openness to change values, they were positively related to all the soft skills we considered, except for negotiation (H1, H3). Openness to change values share with self-enhancement values the personal focus, but, contrary to these latest, they foster self-expansion and

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growth orientation (Schwartz et al., 2012). The defining motivational goals of openness to change values are the independence of thought and action (e.g., choosing, creating, exploring), the excitement, the challenges, and the novelties (Schwartz, 1992, 2012). As such, students who endorse these values might be more prone to be flexible and creative, solve problems quickly (maybe relying on innovative thinking or exploring all the possible solutions), assemble, work, and lead a team. Thus, being what scholars define as "transformative leader". (Yue et al., 2019). On the other hand, negotiation demands being open, friendly, and assertive about one's arguments. This implies having the ability to prioritize a compromise that may suit the welfare of the group, even at the expense of personal opinions and interests (Schneider, 2012). Thus, negotiation represents a skill that might conflict with the independence of thought and action emphasized by openness to change values.

Considering conservation and self-transcendence values, they are positively associated with all interpersonal soft skills (H2), except for the link between conservation and negotiation. Conservation and self-transcendence values are both conceptualized as social-focused values because they mainly regulate the way people socially interact and are related to others, complying with the basic need for relatedness (Russo et al., 2021b). Thus, students who endorse these values are naturally inclined to communicate assertively, without prevaricating the ideas and opinions of others, to develop cooperative relationships, and to manage and solve conflicts. However, contrary to self-transcendence values, conservation adheres to the need to avoid conflicts on one side, and the need to avoid unpredictability and changes on the other side (Barni et al., 2022). Students who attach great importance to these values might thus be unable to negotiate with others as it implies being open to uncertainty. Self-transcendence values are also positively linked with two intrapersonal (self-evaluation and flexibility) and methodological (learning to learn and problem-solving) skills (H3). Self-transcendence values promote a mindset that focuses on the wellbeing of others, transcending the self (Schwartz, 1992). Students who endorse these values tend to be more prone to engage in self-evaluation reflections through which they evaluate their actions based on the benefits brought to others. Moreover, they tend to be flexible in order to enhance the wellbeing of their ingroup or other people in need, as they are themselves more prone to struggle in uncomfortable circumstances (Pask, 2005). Finally, previous findings have shown that self-transcendence motivations are positively linked with wisdom (Koltko-Rivera, 2006). Self-transcendence values are conceptualized as growth values, and wisdom is considered the highest form of human development (Sternberg, 2003), which requires constantly

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finding new ways to learn, and opening to the worldview. This worldview leads to finding alternative solutions to small and big problems, adopting an altruistic perspective (Koltko-Rivera, 2006).

Despite the promising results discussed above, four main limitations of the present study must be acknowledged. Firstly, its cross-sectional nature does not allow us to assume the causality of the relationships between personal values and soft skills. Thus, future studies should adopt a longitudinal design to solve this gap. However, several previous studies have shown that values represent guiding principles, shaping attitudes, inclinations, and behaviors (see Roccas & Sagiv, 2017). Although statistical causalities among variables were not assumed, it is theoretically plausible that personal values represent precursors of soft skills. Secondly, the study's sample size is relatively small. To face this limit, we use the bootstrap method to compute confidence intervals, a statistical technique that tests effects that emerge from a given population while simulating samples out of a larger dataset (Schoemann et al., 2017). Thirdly, the study adopts a convenience sample with more female students than male students, resulting in a need to control the results for sex (and age). Finally, the study sample is unbalanced by the participants' course of study. The study adopts a convenience sample that allows to mostly reach students with a bachelor's degree in Human Nutrition Sciences or a master's degree in Psychology. Thus, future studies should involve students from different courses and analyze the possible differences among them. Indeed, certain degree courses may train students in specific soft skills rather than others (e.g., psychology students are often taught to be good communicators and work in a team).

Despite these limitations, this is the first study that addresses the association between personal values and soft skills in a group of university students, highlighting how values are related to inclinations and skills. The present findings pave the way for two potential practical implications. Firstly, orientation interventions should also considering value assessment. This includes (i) counselors making students aware of the skills they have (ii) making students aware of the interconnections about their value priorities, skills, and vocational interests, and (iii) which values are to be prioritized to make students more likely to be hired, and compatible with their goals and vocations. Secondly, educational and psychological interventions (e.g., service-learning and value affirmation) should be refined (and even combined) to strengthen soft skills in students, also considering their value priorities. On the one hand, service-learning is an active learning method effective for developing soft skills in students through a pragmatic progressive learning process (Culcasi et al., 2021, Culcasi & Venegas, 2023). On the other hand, value affirmation

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interventions foresee three main activities: 1. Enhancing awareness of one's core values; 2. Taking ownership of own one's important values; 3. Putting these values into action. We believe that combining service-learning approach with value affirmation interventions can benefit students (Bradley et al., 2015; McQueen & Klein 2006; Rapa et al., 2020). Affirming values before students become involved in service-learning programs gives them the opportunity to implement what they are studying through community actions, aligning with their value priorities. In this way, there would be an enhancement of soft skills and a promotion of positive development in terms of personal flourishing (Culcasi et al., 2021). It would be valuable for future studies to refine a psychoeducational approach that combines service-learning with value affirmation for university students and examine its effects on academic performance and positive developmental dimensions, such as engagement, self-efficacy, and overall wellbeing.

Data Availability Statement: The data presented in this study are available on reasonable request from the corresponding author.

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