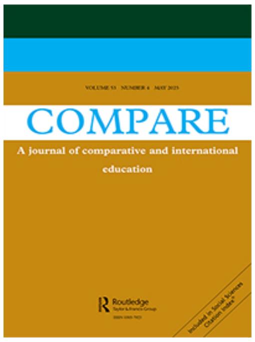

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Students' experiences of extracurricular activities in elite secondary schools in Lahore

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ABSTRACT
Drawing on discussions on extracurricular activities in interviews with eight students in elite secondary schools, this article aims to understand the experiences of young people navigating aspirations and identifications in the postcolonial, globalising context of Lahore, Pakistan. In this study, extracurricular activities are conceptualised as spatial and commodification practices of elite schools. A focus on third spaces and their relationship with cultural and structural influences is preferred for understanding students' experiences. Inductive thematic analysis led to three themes: students' reasons for participation and the role participation plays in accessing particular pathways; the role school administration plays in organising activities and popular selection criteria; and lastly, the ongoing negotiation with parents regarding participation and the social expectations of a student's behaviour. The study aims to offer an in-depth understanding of students' experiences in this context by raising significant questions while contributing to conversations pertaining to social justice, inequality, and mental wellbeing.

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Elite school practices; Global South; social justice; extracurricular activities; postcolonial theory; Pakistan

Introduction

Education in Pakistan has been researched using multiple theoretical perspectives and positionalities, yet multi-dimensional accounts of students' experiences are rarely found. The current study is based on students' interviews and aims to provide a nuanced understanding of the experiences of eight students attending elite private schools in Lahore. Focusing on their discussions of school-based extracurricular activities, this paper illustrates their experience of participation and its association with long-term aspirations. Negotiations and identifications employed by young people in a globalising world alongside specific cultural and structural influences are explored. The purpose of this article is to provide a deeper understanding of students' experiences of the complex relationship between globalisation and society in the context of upwardly mobile urban Pakistan. This study raises pertinent questions for further research.

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Inductive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006) led to our theoretical framing. The analysis is informed by writings on elite schools (Kenway 2018; Kenway and Fahey 2014; Kenway and Langmead 2017; Koh and Kenway 2016; Sancho 2015) and postcolonial hybrid identifications (Bhabha 2012; Bhatia 2017; Bulhan 2015). We considered research illustrating the dilemmas faced by and opportunities offered to young people in somewhat similar contexts (Kapadia 2017; Rao et al. 2013) to be particularly relevant. In the following section, we provide the contextual and theoretical framework. This is followed by the method and findings section. A discussion of the themes generated follows. The conclusion focuses on the implications of findings for understanding young people's school experiences and possible lines for future research.

Contextual and theoretical framing

In this section, we describe the context of this study, and outline the concepts and research that informed our analysis.

Private schools and urban Pakistan

Schools in Pakistan's urban areas have been categorised using language, costs, and ownership as criteria for classification (Husain 2005; Jimenez and Tan 1987; Rahman 2005). These often overlap, and private schools in metropoles are predominantly considered to be English-medium schools. In analyses of medium of instruction and curriculum, English language and international curriculum have been conceptualised to represent symbolic power and are related to aspirations (Haidar 2019; Tamim 2017). The school one attends is associated with the opportunity to access discreet economic pathways, thereby exercising social mobility (Husain 2005; Shamim 2011). Hussain 2005) traced a trajectory from school to higher education or career choices with distinct outcomes for students in different categories of schools. He suggested that students from private English-medium schools, studying an international curriculum, went on to study in elite universities locally and then abroad.

Although it can be argued that these writings allude to 'elite' as a distinct category for schools in urban areas, the focus has remained on outcomes and a Bourdieusian lens dominates analyses. A detailed categorisation of the elite school binary was undertaken by Rahman (2004). Despite being a useful account which wove together language, schools' historical position, and parents' social class, we found it to be limited in its application for the current study. Much time has lapsed since then, and he has not expanded on the practices that continue to make schools elite. It has been acknowledged that private schools in urban Pakistan are diverse and under-researched (Institute of Social and Policy Sciences 2010). Therefore, in order to understand the narratives of participants focused in this study, research on elite schools situated in other contexts was also referred to.

Defining elite schools and their practices

Elite schools have been identified using a variety of markers, such as their historical position, student demographic, curriculum, and symbolic displays (Hayden 2011;

Kenway 2018). As previously noted, the schools that participants attended are English-medium private schools offering international curriculum. Hayden (2011) notes that, increasingly, similar schools around the world are catering to a socio-economically advantaged local population as opposed to a transnational global elite. Such schools are spaces that pave the way for global mobility and offer the promise of engagement in international markets (Kenway 2018). Moreover, these are increasingly preferred by a section of the population, often an upwardly mobile middle class, to exercise their affective agency (Kenway, Fahey, and Koh 2013; Sancho 2015). These elite schools occupy a position of privilege in the national context and accrue material and social advantages to their students. Similar advantages are not accessible to students in other local schools, arguably furthering inequality (Brown 1990; Lee and Wright 2016). Therefore, in the context of Lahore, the elite schools that participants of this study attended were 'the best of the best' and had consistent markers of success. These included outstanding results in Cambridge International Examinations (CIE), a network of influential alumni, English as the medium of instruction, connections with powerful figures, high public esteem, and record of entry to prestigious universities (Husain 2005; Kenway and Langmead 2017; Rahman 2005). Based on the location and historical standing, some could also be called 'new elite schools' (Maqsood 2017; Kenway and Langmead 2017).

While these writings supported us in understanding the distinguishing features of the schools our participants attended, writings on practices (Kenway and Langmead 2017; Koh and Kenway 2016) supported us in analysing the section of interviews focused in the current study. These writings, informed by ethnographic research in the Global South and other contexts, elaborate on various elite school practices and their relationship with social class and student mobility. Koh and Kenway (2016) argue that these practices are fundamental in enabling the schools to 'underwrite and sometimes help to rewrite, class, race and gender privilege and the associated relationship of power' (2–3). The current study conceptualises extracurricular activities and interschool competitions as commodification and spatial practices (Kenway and Fahey 2014; Kenway and Langmead 2017).

In this study, commodification practices are considered to be those practices that support elite schools' 'branding' and are vital for promotion and recruitment in a competitive market of elite education (Kenway and Fahey 2014). These include, for example, promoting the schools' image using online sources and maintaining connections with alumni for recruiting further students. Promoting features highlighting the schools' selectivity is important. One of these is a record of entry to prestigious universities, which requires knowledge of entry criteria. These entry criteria include,' personal statements including a record of leadership and involvement in extracurricular activities and service' (Kenway and Fahey 2014, 183). Therefore, we interpret extracurricular activities as commodification practices because of the role they play in elite schools' branding, the image of selectivity these promote, and the significance of these activities in paving entrance to elite universities. We also consider these extracurricular activities as elite schools' spatial practices.

Spatial practices include 'segregation and seclusion', which 'involves students primarily mixing with students from other similar schools through educational, sporting, cultural, and social occasions' (Kenway and Langmead 2017). Therefore, extracurricular activities and interschool competitions are considered to be spaces of privilege exclusive to members of elite schools, which capture the imaginaries of affluent classes for access to influence and power. Moreover, for analysing students' discussions, we found it imperative to understand their temporal and geographical context. Where the above research lent us vocabulary to articulate the structures and practices students participate in, we now turn to literature that deepened our understanding of young people's experiences of coming of age in a globalising world and negotiating multiple influences in their particular contexts.

Metacolonialism and third spaces

Writings on postcolonial settings expand on the relationship between power, cultures, and identity (Bhabha 2004; Hall and Du Gay 1996; Vertovec, Learmount, and Cohen 2003). Research focusing on experiences of young people in postcolonial, globalising contexts is essential to appreciate the motivations and complex negotiations they rely on to navigate the social and cultural positions they occupy. For the purpose of this study, we draw on Bhatia's (2017) and Bulhan's (2015) writing. Writing on India and Africa, respectively, they discuss identity formation in the age of globalisation. Adopting a psychological lens, they showcase the enduring legacy of colonialism in the age of globalisation. They reflect on the patterns of avowal and disavowal of global or local by people and elaborate on complex patterns of erosion, hybridisation, transformation, and resistance.

Tracing the historical patterns of colonialism, Bulhan (2015) argues that coloniality continues to shape the thoughts and behaviours of societies that endured imperial subjugation. He refers to this as 'metacolonialism' and argues that assumptions of hierarchy are interwoven in various forms of consumption and identifications, a process complicated by globalisation, which he views as a euphemism for 'colonial exploitation and oppression'. In these societies, he argues, elite often become material beneficiaries and ignore their own subjective victimisation while indulging in such processes of exclusivity, phenomena best explained by recourse to Fanon's work (Bulhan 1985, 2015). The effects of these processes are not limited to material inequality and are manifested in everything, including claims to space and mental wellbeing. The home is 'no longer a place of intimacy and security for the metacolonised' not only because of growing economic pressures but also because 'children bring to the home metacolonial ideas contradicting their culture and identity' (Bulhan 2015, 246). Negotiations and identifications involve erosion of the local and glorification of the Western. While Bulhan's (2015) focus is on socio-political dynamics rooted in colonial history, Bhatia (2017) particularly focuses on youth identity formation and globalisation.

The path taken by 'cultural identity formation' is dependent on the cultures involved (Jensen 2003). Bhatia (2017) argues that young people in previously colonised societies are exposed to 'globalisation, multiple cultures and reference points' and their complex negotiations are shaped by contextually specific social structures. He cautions against reading their narratives using taken for granted assumptions about human development. Writing in the context of Pune, India, his research focuses on the narratives of young people attempting to make sense of their globally connected, urban lived realities. In response to 'Western cultural flows', he argues, young people create a 'third space' (Bhabha 2004). This is 'ambivalent, liberatory and hybrid' yet is the outcome of complex negotiations undertaken when people ‘come to terms with the cultural change in their localities’. (Bhatia 2017, 15–16). These offer young people opportunities to create meaning of their experiences from their many cultural positions and subjectivities. Moreover, these third spaces or identities reproduce or reconfigure pre-existing traces of power and hegemony. Identity negotiations are mediated by other factors, including social class and gender (Bhatia 2017, 2020; Lukose 2005), resulting in unique struggles requiring greater appreciation of distinct structural and cultural factors. Research focusing on young people’s narratives of similar negotiations offers a nuanced understanding.

Selected research on young people’s identifications

Rao et al. (2013) studied the social worlds of urban adolescents in India. Their research focused on the formation and impact of cultural identities and related to Arnett’s (2002) hypothesis of bicultural identities – rooted in indigenous values yet connected to a global culture – which they illustrated by coining the term ‘identity remix’. This identity remixing was common among middle-class urban Indian youth. They also established a link between mental wellbeing and the cultures one identified with. Similarly, Saldanha (2002) offered insight into urban youth cultures in Bangalore, India, using music as the space where identifications were performed. Local culture and global influences were negotiated in aesthetic choices, forms, and places of expression. Nevertheless, social class and family affect patterns of negotiation, compromise, and conflict adolescents rely on for managing aspirations and consumption (Saraswathi 1999).

Kapadia (2017) illustrated young people’s every day navigation of globalisation within local anxieties and parental expectations. Focusing on academic performance and high stake exams, the research expanded on spaces adolescents carve out for themselves. They found that digital platforms were popular. Nevertheless, these were precarious and monitored, and gendered expectations also prevailed. Writing in the context of Lahore, Pakistan, though not exclusively focusing on youth, Maqsood (2017) discussed the fusion of local and global cultural and religious flows against the backdrop of social class and social mobility. Therefore, engagement with global influences leads to new and hybrid identifications.

In conclusion, writings on elite schools illustrate the defining features of the schools our participants attended and discussion of practices further specifies the focus of our research. Conceptualisation of processes and experiences of hybridity, metacolonialism, and third spaces are significant to understand the transformations and negotiations young people in postcolonial settings make when exposed to new forms of neoliberal globalisation. Research from South Asia illustrates the complexity of everyday transactions in relation to cultural identifications and social dynamics. These diverse writings support us in exploring the questions: How can students’ experiences inform our understanding of Lahore’s elite schools and their practices? And how does participation in extracurricular activities inform students’ experiences and identifications in a postcolonial globalising context?

Method

We use writings on Pakistan's education systems (Husain 2005; Jimenez and Tan 1987; Rahman 2004; Riaz 2014) to identify schools in Lahore. Experiences of students attending schools in the city are the focus of the research project of which the current study is a part. The broader research project uses Phelan, Davidson, and Cao's (1991, 1994) model as a conceptual framework to orient the inquiry (Denzin and Lincoln 2011). The model focuses on three contexts or settings: school, family and peers. Each setting has a real or perceived boundary, and interactions within or across each are a world unto themselves. These worlds are supposed to mean 'cultural knowledge and behaviour', which are underwritten by expectations, emotional responses, values, and beliefs existing in a dyadic relationship between the individual and their context (Phelan, Yu, and Davidson 1994). Students' experiences, perspectives, and choices illustrate the meanings and understandings of their worlds.

The current study is based on interviews with eight students attending elite private schools. During discussions of their experiences related to school, they talked at length about extracurricular activities. Narratives related to this topic form the data set for this paper, on which an inductive thematic analysis was conducted (Braun and Clarke 2006). An inductive approach was preferred, as little is known about elite schools and students' experiences in the context within which this study is situated. Analysis of findings inspired the search for literature, and multiple writings were referred to. Two hundred and ninety-eight minutes of interview recordings were transcribed for familiarity with the data and its analysis. Initially, 37 codes were generated, which were eventually clustered into three themes. Overlapping patterns, for instance, role of school administration and selection criteria, were clustered together because of their analytical similarities. Therefore, themes discussed here reflect our analytical choices. A descriptive account is offered for each theme, while the discussion is informed by writings on elite schools and a postcolonial lens dominates interpretation.

The terms extracurricular activities and events were used interchangeably by participants and referred to interschool competitions students in secondary and higher secondary years (grade 9–13) participated in. In these years, engagement in extracurricular activities manifests primarily as participation in competitions organised across schools. Intraschool competitions are less common. Students participate in extracurricular activities in events hosted by elite schools across Lahore and, occasionally, in other cities. These events last from one to three days, and each event is dedicated to a particular category of extracurricular activity. Examples of events include art and drama festivals, science festivals, and debating competitions – mainly Model United Nations (MUN), sport festivals, and business and entrepreneurship events.

The day of the event is divided into two parts, during the first part students hold competitions and the second part is a social evening. During the latter, the host school puts on musical performances including student jam sessions, qawwali night or pop-music concert, each on a separate day of the event. Events start early during school hours and continue after school ends. The competition part ends at approximately 6 pm, whereas the social evening can continue until 10 pm. A regular school day is from 7:30 am to 2 pm, with timings changing with the seasons and no provision for after-school activities. Usually, in the run-up to the event, and in the case of particular societies such

Table 1. Participants' details.

Name	Age (in years)	Gender	Grade
Ali	18	Male	12 (A Level*)
Amna	17	Female	11 (IGCSE**)
Salaar	18	Male	12 (A Level)
Nazli	17	Female	12 (A Level)
Leena	16	Female	11 (IGCSE)
Huzaifa	17	Male	11 (IGCSE)
Rafique	18	Male	12 (A Level)
Iesha	18	Female	12 (A Level)

*Advanced level, **International General Certificate of Secondary Education.

as dramatics and debates, on some school days throughout the academic year, participants noted staying after school hours to practice. Debating competitions or MUNs are the most sought after events and have a long history compared to some of the more recent events, such as entrepreneurship competitions.

The eight participants in this study are from six different single-sex schools. All of them are studying for CIE, often the only option in elite private schools. One of the schools in this study offers students the option to choose either international or local curriculum at the end of grade eight. The student reflected that peers studying for the local examination board do not participate in events, even when their own school is the host. Therefore, events and, by inference, the extracurricular activities discussed here are overwhelmingly subscribed to by students studying international curriculum. The terms event and extracurricular activities are used interchangeably in the paper, and, where necessary, a distinction between competition and social evening is made. Table 1 offers relevant details about participants, all names have been anonymised.

Findings

The experiences and reflections participants narrated are clustered together into three themes: reasons for participation and information acquired in the process, the role of school administration and selection criteria, and negotiating with parents and social expectations of behaviour. These themes could be mapped against all narratives except one. Leena does not participate in events and her reflections related to reasons for participation alone; however, her discussion offers valuable insight and is included. On many occasions, participants illustrate their opinions by relying on anecdotes of former experiences, whereas some lessons are vicariously learnt through socialising within these spaces.

Reasons for participation and information acquired in the process

Participation in events, either as delegate or as management personnel, is rewarded with certificates and winnings with trophies. This credentialing of participation and the skills these certificates presumably testify to are considered important for applying to universities abroad for admission to undergraduate courses. Regardless of participant's future aspirations, it was unanimously acknowledged that participation in these events is necessary for making successful applications to universities. It is noteworthy that a similar emphasis on extracurricular activities is not a pre-requisite for admission to local universities where entry is based on annual exam scores or entrance tests. Participation paves the way to university applications in two distinct ways. First, it gives students the necessary skills to showcase on their personal statements. We were told that some universities have a separate form for extracurricular activities and *'there is no end to what you can write there'* (Ali). Second, students meet other prospective applicants on these events, senior students from their own schools and their peers across schools. These interactions are a vital source of 'hot knowledge' regarding university applications and offer students insight into how they compare to others.

Academic excellence does not guarantee success, as three participants mentioned, good grades are ubiquitous and eligibility criteria are widely met. Frequent participation in a variety of extracurricular activities is perceived to be '*admired by*' admission committees as such engagement makes one's application *stand-out*. Moreover, events act as sites necessary for maintaining peer networks and connections vital for awareness of social trends. Huzaifa refers to this social network as *Lahore's Circle*. Participation is viewed as the *'mature'* thing to do; it implies that fellow students have set their goals, are aware of the pathways leading to success, and are willing to work hard towards these. Two of the participants, Leena and Nazli, who do not participate in events or do not intend to apply abroad, respectively, are equally aware of the association between participation and university applications. Nazli, for instance, remarked that her peers in event management teams wish to improve their leadership and management skills to support their personal statement. Leena pondered if lack of participation will disadvantage her in the future, as her peers' applications will look better in comparison.

Additionally, other ways of standing out were also shared, especially if applying to universities in the United States for admission and financial aid. Information about these is acquired through peers that participants meet at events. These include taking on more than the requisite number of courses, taking up a hobby, and volunteering at local welfare organisations or NGOs. Students have to sit a minimum number of subject exams; however, Huzaifa suggests that doing the bare minimum carries stigma. Taking more subjects and later gaining advanced knowledge by reading beyond prescribed curriculum improves chances and often helps students who do not participate in many extracurricular activities. It is believed that admission committees prefer students who have gained a level of expertise in their subject and display *'superior'* knowledge. Ali thinks taking on hobbies reflects a well-rounded applicant and serves to humanise the applicant to the admissions committee. Volunteering, either at established welfare organisations or NGOs recently founded by students or alumni of similar schools, is common. Information about such organisations is mostly gained through peers one meets at events. University admission counselling services provide similar facilities for civic engagement tailored to presumed personal statement requirements. Information about these services and their record of success in securing admission and financial aid is acquired through peers that participants meet at events. However, volunteering is not always motivated by university applications. A participant has been volunteering for over 3 years and finds this to be a rewarding use of their free time and a meaningful experience. Nevertheless, the popularity of volunteering among prospective applicants has been disappointing for Leena. She finds the instrumental use of volunteering disillusioning as it shows that her peers do not do it '*out of the goodness of their heart*'. The focus on resume building makes her peers' participation in activities *'a lot less genuine'* for her.

Participation in extracurricular activities does not, however, assure students of the fulfilment of their goal. Two factors complicate their choices: uncertainty about choice of major subject and dependence on financial support from the university. Of the six participants who aspire to apply, only one has clarity on their choice of subject. The other five reflect that their choices are malleable and navigating a plethora of options is difficult. Those in Grade 12 are beginning to consult university admissions counselling services popular among their peers. These counselling services charge exorbitant fee. Initially, majority had wanted to apply to Ivy League universities, but gradually they realised that securing admission was difficult. The scarcity of funding for undergraduate courses in the UK has already limited the choices of the participants in this study, a concern not shared by all of their peers. Socialising within *Lahore's Circle* has been instrumental in informing them of universities they had not considered before and processes of applying for financial aid, without which studying in the US would be next to impossible. All participants plan on applying to elite universities in Pakistan as a backup plan. The preference for these universities is shaped by engaging in their extracurricular activities, the perceived similarities in culture, and their popularity among peers from similar schools. Participation in extracurricular activities is considered a step in the direction of gaining entry to universities abroad and in the case of US universities, financial aid. Nonetheless, participation is complicated by other factors related to their school, family, peers, and broader social dynamics.

Role of school administration and selection criteria

Organising and managing events is a student-led endeavour, but coordinating with school administration on key aspects is necessary. This includes issues related to hosting an event, such as its financing, and seeking permission when participating as a visiting team to other schools. Although extracurricular activities offer relative freedom otherwise absent in school life, unpleasant encounters with school administration are shared by all eight participants engaged in events. Participants find their school administration to be arbitrarily authoritative, unrealistically demanding, or apathetically unsupportive. Often students have to dedicate time from regular school day for running events, and little support with coursework and meeting internal deadlines is available. Such instances are viewed as individual issues which can be resolved with self-sufficiency, without invoking support from administration, thereby leaving participants feeling helpless. Teaching faculty in Advanced Level is predominantly visiting faculty, and maintenance of office hours is not common. Nazli, commenting on her school's administration and faculty states *'[they] have no clue to our problems'*.

Similarly, Rafique shares that permission can be arbitrarily withdrawn or withheld without recourse to negotiation. Participants reflect that with the expansion of elite school market in Lahore, interschool rivalry has led their school administration to withhold permission to participate in events held by new competitors. While in such cases administration's stance is widely known, in others, previously granted permission has been withdrawn. One of the participants narrated withdrawal of permission a week before the event on arbitrary grounds, which they viewed as an attempt by the administration to assert their authority for personal validation. Attempts at negotiation with the administration had failed, leaving the student representative *'tearful and humiliated'*. Witnessing such experiences also leads to avoidance of positions requiring working closely with the administration, since being visible comes with disadvantages that can spill over. Ali describes his previous experiences of liaising with administration as '*traumatic*'. Unlike other participants, Iesha does not share disappointing experiences, though she is quick to point out that her example is not representative as she has been in the same school since middle school years, and has an established relationship with her school administration. One of the persistent structural issues discussed by all participants is the question of event sponsorships.

Students are expected to raise funds for events on their own. Beyond a venue, usually school building, and a meagre amount of money, students struggle to cite what else their school offers for hosting events. Sponsorships, in cash or kind, are sought by students with the tacit agreement of the school administration. Ali and Salaar, both experienced at organising social evenings, suggest that having popular companies as sponsors yields more funds, which results in the likelihood of inviting celebrity singers to the closing ceremony. The more popular the singer, the higher the numbers of interested audience. Since these are ticketed events, the closing ceremony is also a source of revenue. Participating teams have to pay registration fee, the cost of which has increased since COVID-19 and individuals have to furnish these; no bursaries are available. All these factors have to be taken into account by the student organising committee. While participants remarked that events with celebrity performances are entertaining, those in organising teams presume that their school administration has other reasons to encourage generous sponsorships. They believe that student's enthusiasm is equated with their willingness to secure sponsorships. Moreover, the more popular the event, the higher the publicity of the school, especially on social media, and this image of exclusivity is '*part of their marketing*'.

However, encouraging sponsorships skews participation in favour of those students who can guarantee such benefits. Securing sponsorships is a function of students' personal and family connections. Those who have secured sponsors shared relying on such associations and those who have been unsuccessful cited lack of similar connections. Students heading the event select their peers for management roles, and the possibility of getting a sponsor increases chances of participation. Oftentimes, the availability of a sponsor is leveraged for a chance to participate and to claim particular roles within the team. Besides the promise to secure funding, selection is perceived to be mired in nepotism and opacity.

The '*right friends*' are important to curry favour with. Students in leadership positions choose their own friends or friends-of-friends for a variety of roles across event teams, resulting in *'one friend group'* dominating all extracurricular activities during their school years. In discussions of their journey into involvement in events, all seven students who participate in events mentioned being introduced to activities through friends who had prior experience of participation or were well-connected with school seniors in charge of selection. Rafique offered detailed insight into selection processes as he has previously experienced rejection and later figured out '*whom to ask*'. Trials for sports team are conducted by students to whom the coach has delegated responsibility, the merits of which he considers questionable. In early years, he found students making the list who had not shown up for the trials. Although this disappointment had led him to resolving never to try again, he later befriended people who supported his participation. Reflecting on the selection process in vogue, Rafique sympathises with his peers who are better at some sports than him but cannot secure a chance because they do not share a similar network. Opportunities for participation, mostly, come around only when a team goes on a losing streak. Salaar avoids participating in debates as his English language skills were not focused on in his previous school, where he participated in sports. A change of school in Grade 12 has offered him more opportunities for participation, a change of friend-group has also been helpful. Debating teams are considered the most competitive and insular, school teams also participate in international competitions. Coordinating with school administration and navigating peer relations complicate organisation and participation in the run up to the event, and negotiating with parents and managing social expectations of behaviour further add to this and are more obvious on the days of the competition.

Negotiating with parents and social expectations of behaviour

Participants have mixed experiences with seeking parental consent, managing parents' academic expectations, justifying the need for participation, and enlisting their support with commuting to events – all of which are intertwined. Ali initially struggled with convincing his parents as they feared his grades would plummet, but when he excelled at both, they were more likely to support his participation. The prospects of achieving long-term aspirations also played a role for Ali, Salaar, and Rafique. Huzaifa's parents are often concerned that he overworks himself and should not take on more than his coursework, and therefore, he frequently has to explain to them the benefits participation accrues when applying for universities as *'parents aren't that aware'*. Rafique and Nazli attend limited events and Iesha does not struggle with parental support. Amna has consistently struggled with negotiating with her parents, and their disapproval has *'sucked the joy out of participation'* ; the overarching issue is commuting, as picking her up from school at odd hours is difficult to schedule.

The popular mode of commuting in Lahore is by way of personal vehicle, some of the participants had drivers, but most have to rely on their parents to pick them up at event closing time. Permission to carpool was only granted to Salaar and Rafique once they entered Grade 12 and under exceptional circumstances. Participants navigate this issue using two possible ways: (1) they select events to attend based on the host school's location; (2) they limit their participation to the competition part of the event and leave before the social evening starts. Nevertheless, when hosting an event, participants often stay for the entire duration of the event, and their parents find the late ending time inconvenient which is exacerbated by the heavy traffic outside the school. Explaining to peers the issues that emanate from one's home is difficult. Amna, for instance, finds it stressful when her peers accuse her of *'not taking it seriously'* when she cannot show up for after-school practice sessions as she has already been struggling to juggle coursework, parental permission, and managing commute.

Additionally, girls' experiences of hosting and participating in events are affected by other social dynamics as these are the few spaces they share with their male peers. Factors that affect them are concerns and experiences of harassment and upholding expectations that their prior socialisation has, implicitly or explicitly, instructed them to. Through friends and social media pages run by peers, girls gain insight into which male peers they need to avoid. Boys have shaped their behaviour as well and reflected on learning socially acceptable behaviour in these settings. Girls, unanimously, praise their school for offering them a safe space where they can raise concerns with their school administration and limit event invitations. Moreover, policies are in place to support them on the day of the event. However, avoiding close encounters or withdrawing participation from events hosted at other schools, especially boys' schools, are the only options available to them as members of visiting teams.

These spaces allow for socialising with peers of the opposite gender. Although both boys and girls shared that their parents have made known their reservations, girls talked about the dynamics of friendships with male peers in more detail. All three girls choose to keep their interactions professional in events they host and participate in, even if they have cordial friendships with their male peers outside of the school, as is the case with Nazli. Not only do the expectations of their parents shape their decisions but also the attitude of other adults around them. Members of staff on duty during events do not approve and often the *'moral judgement'* of teachers can spill into the classroom dynamics. Discussing their peers, Amna and Nazli pointed out that such friendships are possible only if one's parents are *liberal or unaware*, as Amna says, *'that is the environment in Pakistan, you just don't tell your parents'*. Managing social expectations evokes empathy for peers. Nonetheless, conflict with boys does not end well for girls and the only recourse they seem to have is to relinquish space to their male peers. Though girls sympathise with girls forced to do so, their options for offering tangible support are limited. However, if the conflict occurs between a girl and a boy who were previously friends, empathy is scarce. Girls are less likely to support their peers as they are of the view that *'she should have known better'* or *'I wouldn't have done it'*. Since the community of elite school students who participate in these events is interconnected and information is shared on social media, incidents of harassment and fallouts are known, leading girls directly affected by this to quit participating.

Discussion

The reflections participants shared regarding extracurricular activities and events support the idea that these function as elite school commodification and spatial practices (Kenway and Fahey 2014; Kenway and Langmead 2017). Students drew a link between participating in events and acquiring skills or credentials important for applying to universities abroad. These confer exclusivity, and participation may increase one's sociocultural capital, enabling one to standout and access elite higher education (Reay, David, and Ball 2001). Students' perspectives on markers of a successful event, and the stakes their schools have, allude to the significant role these events seem to play in the promotion of the school and the maintenance of its position (Brown 1990; Kenway and Fahey 2014). They also shared that teams across schools, especially debating teams, participate in international competitions. Extracurricular activities, therefore, offer certain schools another opportunity to participate in maintaining and creating global connections (Hayden 2011; Kenway and Fahey 2014; Kenway and Langmead 2017). In some cases, alumni continue to actively engage with these practices. In other instances, their storied legacy lives on in narratives shared by peers. Successful alumni represent the ideals others aspire to, and access to their chosen pathways is considered possible through engagement in similar practices. In addition to the similarities these events have with the characteristics of commodification practices, these are also interpreted here as spatial practices.

As Huzaifa puts it, these events create *Lahore's Circle*, spaces that offer a site for socialising with peers from similar schools, thereby maintaining seclusion and segregation (Kenway and Langmead 2017). Access to peer networks with shared aspirations, hot knowledge regarding university admission process (Reay, Crozier, and Clayton 2009), and information about other opportunities is exclusively available in these spaces. This access improves chances of success for otherwise equally capable students, chances not accessible to others outside these spaces. As pointed out by participants, peers act as gatekeepers for participation, further making these spaces exclusive for a subset of elite private school students. Interestingly, elite schools are conceptualised as places of affective agency (Kenway, Fahey, and Koh 2013), and our research makes us ponder that paths to whose desires are paved through these? Research on Pakistan's education (Husain 2005; Rahman 2005), as well as studies from other contexts, suggest that a socio-economically advantaged section of society relies on these schools to achieve their aspirations (Hayden 2011). However, the different cultural flows adolescents negotiate suggest that students' desires may not always align with those of their parents. Understanding this is possible by drawing on writings on the association between elite schools and social class alongside writings on youth identity formation and postcolonial societies.

'Students know what is best for them, parents aren't that aware'. Understanding questions surrounding students' affective agency requires focusing on two aspects: the role of the school in 'underwriting and rewriting class' (Koh and Kenway 2016) and spatial practices as sites for learning. It has been pointed out that English-medium private schools allow parents to ensure their children's mobility (Husain 2005; Haidar 2019; Shamim 2011). While prior research has acknowledged the link between these schools and social mobility aspirations, the pathways to aspirations and manifestation of mobility may be changing. For instance, students can attend university abroad at undergraduate level rather than at postgraduate level, as Hussain's (2005) trajectory would have predicted. Elite schools are not only feeder schools for local elite universities but also make international higher education accessible to students who are not legacy children, thus widening possibilities for a socially advantaged segment of society, albeit at the cost of furthering inequality (Hayden 2011; Lee and Wright 2016). Discussions surrounding funding options suggest that there is variation within the student body, a phenomenon observed in other contexts as well (Hayden 2011; Khan 2013). This is evident in participants' anxiety regarding securing scholarships and diversifying their options, while some of their peers do not appear to have similar financial considerations. This also resonates with Maqsood's (2017) writing on the nature of Lahore's urban demographic. Therefore, symbolic displays and aspirations grounded in social class are accessible for students whose parents may not have imagined similar outcomes.

Second, spatial practices act as sites that offer students information about higher education, which may not be available to their parents. This is acquired through peers and services within and outside the school. Participants' discussions of their parents' awareness and facilitation of such aspirations hint at long-term negotiations in which young people exercise their agency to convince reluctant parents through consistent success and repetitive reminders. On the one hand, parental expectations regarding academic performance are upheld, and on the other, their conceptualisations of 'mobility' and success are constantly shaped. However, engagement in these practices is possible by balancing traditional expectations with new ideas of success (Kapadia 2017). Rather than focusing on grades alone, values and characteristics considered necessary for participation in other higher education settings are sought. Attempts are made to embody characteristics of the candidate that admissions committee presumably prefer by acquiring specific skills, taking up hobbies, and participating in civic engagement activities. Characteristics that arguably stem from a Western normative understanding of development (Bhatia 2017).

Third spaces are constructed on the confluence of traditional and global cultural flows (Bhatia 2017, 2020). Events offer participants a rare opportunity to perform youth identifications as similar avenues are seldom available outside the school. The variety of competitions on offer, for instance, Model United Nations, Graffiti art, music jam sessions, etc., exemplify the dynamic nature of forms of aesthetic displays and spaces for expression exclusive to young people in similar contexts (Saldanha 2002). Therefore, these third spaces are hybrid and liberating for the performance of identifications. Additionally, these blur school hierarchies as students take the lead in organising events. Nevertheless, third spaces are constructed and managed in relation to existing forms or structures of hegemony and power, leading to remixing, resisting or reproducing (Bhatia 2017; Bulhan 2015; Rao et al. 2013). This is evident in accounts of the role played by school administration, peers, and parents to support or hinder participation.

The emphasis placed on obedience and deference to elders makes young people's navigation of agency within traditional norms more pronounced. Some aspects of this, pertaining to negotiating with parents, were discussed earlier. Similar concerns regarding permission surround negotiations with school administration. In some instances, there is little recourse to discussion or mediation leaving students feeling alienated. The top-down approach contradicts the leadership and teamwork skills participants aspire to gain. However, in other scenarios, structural issues are reproduced by students making these spatial practices more exclusive. Gatekeeping, opaque selection processes, and informal networks for sharing of information appear to mediate the process. The tacit support of the school for securing sponsorships incentivises biases in selection. We wonder if the exclusive nature of elite schools and their practices sets the process in motion for performing and desiring exclusivity within the boundaries of the school as much as it does with the outside, accentuating the image of elite school as a space of victimisation and material benefit for those participating in these spaces (Bulhan 2015). The gendered experience of students reflects the affordances and barriers unique to these mixed-gender spaces in a predominantly single-sex schooling system. These experiences also reflect the structural and cultural boundaries within which these spaces are constructed.

Parental expectations of behaviour and socialisation affected the choices of girls and boys. Kapadia's (2017) research pointed to a similar pattern: in addition to reasons rooted in culture, parents were likely to consider friendships with the opposite gender a distraction from studies. Girls' opinions regarding the judgement surrounding such friendships, especially that of teachers and peers, suggest the discursive creation of the 'ideal educated girl' (Khoja-Moolji 2017). Such views reflect and reproduce the 'good girl' binary, which has a long history, particularly, in Muslim South Asia. Their views regarding peers whose social interactions do not follow conventional expectations illustrate the difference in values ascribed to them and their parents, and weakening of traditional values is assumed. The navigation of third spaces is a subjective experience, and digital platforms supported girls in being proactive to obviate risks. However, the same platforms could also jeopardise girls' participation. While girls' schools offered safe spaces, the opinions regarding girls and notions of 'victim' appear to be embedded in patriarchal understandings and performance of femininity and care (Hooks 2018).

Conclusion

In conclusion, participants' narratives illustrate elite school practices, their subjective value in urban Lahore, complex identifications across cultural flows, and intricate navigation of third spaces embedded in particular structures. Student demographic, selection process, and gender dynamics further enhance the exclusivity underlying elite school practices. The role school administration appears to play in explicitly or implicitly biasing participation in favour of some students invites further investigation. The tacit support school administration lends to financing events through sponsors, often requiring reliance on family connections, and the influence this has on students' behaviour is a surprising finding. This requires deeper analysis of the elite private school as a profit-led institution and the implication this has on social justice in a society with existing issues of social stratification. The willing and unquestioning participation of students in propagating this flawed system is surprising. Their faith in meritocracy elsewhere while participating in exclusionary practices in Pakistan appears antithetical. Understanding how elite school students are complicit, voluntary or involuntary, in being material beneficiaries of a system propelling inequality would be beneficial. Since alumni networks appear vital, this would also provide insight into patterns of (re)producing inequality in Pakistan. One wonders how students from elite schools benefitting from these practices respond to social and material inequality later in life. The preference for local elite universities, informed by perceived similarities in culture, harkens back to questions of social justice and inequality and the place of school within these dynamics. The instrumental use of civic engagement and the disillusionment this may cause was an unexpected finding. One wonders what the engagement of students taking these pathways to exclusivity would be with others who share the context but not their spaces and the long-term impact this will have on subjective understanding of compassion. The impact of these practices on dissonance experienced by young people, and the expansion of distance between them and others around them requires attention alongside broader questions of identifications in a globalised world. It is also crucial to understand their effect on the mental health of students and wider society alongside decolonising conceptions of success. The latter would require research regarding social mobility and social justice in Pakistan alongside wider and inclusive conversations across different sections of society. The challenges of balancing expectations as well as enduring and perpetuating unfair practices need further research, especially from a mental wellbeing perspective. Particular attention needs to be paid to gendered experiences in an otherwise largely gender-segregated schooling system. Moreover, questions regarding the association between exclusive spaces and the widening of distance between different sections of society in Pakistan's context need exploring along with understanding the long-term impact of this on young people and on society. The conceptualisation and pathways of social mobility in the context of Pakistan, along with an overview of local higher education, would add more nuance to the current study and not enable the reproduction of issues that postcolonial literature warns against.

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