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The Readiness Trap: Why Capable Adolescents Avoid Leadership Roles in Sargodha, Pakistan

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Abstract

Despite having one of the world's largest youth populations, Pakistan sees very low youth participation in formal leadership roles and activities. The present study focuses on external barriers such as cultural norms, age bias, and limited opportunities. Fewer studies are available that show what happens inside young people's minds when they are in a situation where they have to make a decision. This study explores internal psychological and external barriers that result in school-going adolescents avoiding leadership opportunities altogether. Data were collected from May to August 2025. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 20 participants aged 14 to 18 from private schools. The findings indicate that leadership avoidance was associated with fear of failure, unstable self-worth, and the calculation of potential gains and losses associated with leadership. The response of family and school curriculum may further reinforce or reduce these barriers. The participants who actively held leadership roles also described similar psychological pressures. This suggests that the difference between leaders and those who avoid it was not the presence or absence of fear, but it was how they manage it. Therefore, this study suggests that youth leadership participation requires both the opportunities and the way they view competence and the potential consequences of taking on leadership roles.

Keywords: fear of failure, avoidance of leadership, adolescent, self-efficacy, internal barriers, Sargodha, Pakistan

1. Introduction

Around 64% of Pakistan's population is under the age of 30 (United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], 2017). Yet, they hold few leadership positions in schools, communities, and public life. And many young people simply avoid obtaining them. Whenever an opportunity appears, most of them hold back and wait for others to do it.

Much of the existing literature describes barriers such as cultural norms that place most of the authority on adults, families that prioritize academics, schools that reward obedience, and financial constraints that leave little to no room for unpaid responsibilities (Lall, 2014; UNDP, 2017). But these accounts remain descriptive and don't provide a detailed explanation of how these barriers become self-imposed limits for young people and how they begin to internalize them. A boy who has been told since childhood that he is too young will internalize this belief and, at some point, will start imposing it on himself (Freire, 1970).

This study specifically focuses on the internal map of young people while keeping the external one in view. This study assesses school-going adolescents, a segment that is almost ignored, as more focus is on university students and young adults in the labour market (Lall, 2014). This segment matters more because beliefs about oneself and one's capabilities from early stages of life are difficult to reverse later in adulthood. (Bandura, 1997; Eccles & Wigfield, 2002).

The study had three objectives:

- To identify external barriers that school-going adolescents in Sargodha, Punjab, face in leadership roles.
- To explain internal barriers that students face, such as fear of failure, low motivation, self-doubt, and imposter-type feelings.
- To explain how external and internal barriers connect, using established psychological and sociological theory.

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A qualitative, explanatory design was used for this because the aim of the study was not to count the barriers but to explain how they work.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Youth Participation: Global and Pakistani Context

International frameworks treat youth participation as a right and development need. Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child gives children the right to express views in all those matters that affect them (United Nations, 1989). Hart (1992), however, demonstrated that Participation at the institutional level may be tokenism, whereby young people are merely displayed, consulted, and provided with a decorative position without any authority to make decisions. Positive youth development research has revealed that leadership and contribution experiences during adolescence are connected to the 5 Cs: competence (ability), confidence (self-belief), connection (strong bonds), character (morals), caring (empathy).

Even though Pakistanis were enthusiastic about changes in government, most were not ready to participate, were unaware of their rights, and did not know their value in society, according to the study by Lall (2014). Furthermore, their involvement was confined to voting or didn't exist at all. The overall situation is the same at the national level. The Pakistan National Human Development Report was compiled after engaging over 130,000 individuals, the majority of whom were youth. They have outlined a generation that is highly motivated but lacks platforms for speaking up and participating (UNDP, 2017). A school curriculum revolving around exams and academics may also contribute to this problem. They leave no room for initiative or any useful leadership practice skills (Lall, 2014; UNDP, 2017). The studies listed are solid and show that there are external barriers, such as age hierarchy, limited family expectations, exam-focused classrooms, and few opportunities. They are aware of these barriers but are generally described in a generalised manner.

2.2 Internal Barriers: Theoretical Framework

This study is guided by three bodies of theory:

1. Self-efficacy theory Bandura (1997). This theory emphasizes the importance of an individual's belief about his or her ability to meet actual or perceived challenges they may face. As soon as they start to doubt their own capabilities, they simply walk away from the job, regardless of how talented they are. These beliefs are formed through four main sources: successes, observing others, verbal encouragement by others, and emotional and physical states. There are two failure modes of interest here. First, low self-efficacy initiates a cycle where young people begin to believe that they will fail without even trying anything, causing them to withdraw efforts from tasks or avoid them altogether. Second, they develop an inflated self-judgment. This is unearned overconfidence, which is highly dangerous because actual experiences do not support it, and growth is stifled due to a lack of motivation to learn (Bandura, 1997). The Expectancy-value theory further suggests that people will exert effort when they believe they will succeed and when they value the outcome, and that if either of these factors is missing, efforts may decline (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002).
2. In addition to confidence and value, we need to account for barriers that exist within us: the fear of failure and impostor syndrome, the concern of the second body. Clance and Imes (1978) first described impostor syndrome, which refers to the internal experience of intellectual phoniness experienced by many competent people. In a later systematic review of 62 other studies, prevalence varied from 9% to 82% based on the measure and cutoff used, and a consistent relationship to anxiety, depression, and impaired performance was obtained (Bravata et al., 2020). According to De Castella et al. (2013), secondary students tend to avoid giving effort as a form of self-protection against negative outcomes of failure and criticism. Moreover, the way individuals handle these

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failures leads to completely different mindsets (Dweck, 2006). For instance, a fixed mindset may treat failure as a final stamp on our competence and capability and keep our involvement very low. In contrast, a growth mindset views the same failure as useful data for growth and compels us to try harder next time.

3. The third framework moves from individual psychology to external barriers. Paulo Freire (1970) famously argued that people who are constantly treated as incompetent will one day internalize that image of themselves and will actively restrict themselves from trying anything. These messages are enforced on youth by various institutions. Family and school constantly bombard youth with messages that they are too young, too inexperienced, or simply that they lack sufficient skills. Gradually, these judgments become part of the youth's life, and they accept them as their own voice, while in reality they are just something borrowed from another person, simply without knowing.

2.3 Research Gap

Among the existing literature in Pakistan, a critical gap remains unaddressed. Most of the Pakistani research focuses on external barriers such as academic focus and financial constraints. As a result, very little is known about the mental processes of students that motivate them to act a certain way. Western psychology offers sufficient research around self-efficacy belief, impostor syndrome, and the fear of failure. These concepts, however, are often not used in the South Asian context, and little research is available on leadership barriers faced by secondary school students in Punjab so far.

The few studies that do touch on these barriers mostly remain quantitative. These surveys indicate the existence of low self-efficacy, but they don't explain how these beliefs are formed.

This lack of explanation is a significant problem for Punjab province, where traditional age- and gender based systems govern the daily life of secondary school students. Yet, limited research has explored how adolescents navigate through these barriers they face.

This research focuses on and addresses these gaps by analyzing both internal and external barriers together. This study focuses not only on external factors, but also on how a message that is rooted in the adult world and age-based oppression becomes internal self-doubt and impostor syndrome. Finally, this piece is a locally developed model of how structural constraints affect youth leadership in Pakistan.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

The study used a qualitative explanatory design, based on reflexive thematic analysis (RTA; Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019). RTA was selected in preference to interpretative phenomenological analysis for three main reasons. First, the study sought to identify patterns across participants rather than conduct an intensive, case-by-case analysis of each account. Second, the research question is explanatory, asking why a phenomenon occurs across a group, rather than purely experiential. Third, RTA allows for intentional use of existing theory (self-efficacy, impostor phenomenon, internalized subordination) as an interpretive lens, which aligns with the study's third objective. The data were analyzed inductively by coding them at the semantic and latent levels (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2021).

3.2 Participants and Setting

The participants were 20 school-going adolescents (13 boys, 7 girls) aged 14 to 18 years, studying in Grades 8 to 12 in Sargodha, Punjab. All of the participants attended private schools. The sample was obtained through purposive sampling to find variation in leadership engagement. The sample of students included those participants who actively held leadership roles, students who were selective about it, students who had withdrawn, and students who avoided the leadership roles altogether. The variation kept in the sample was intentional so that barriers could be identified by comparing those who lead with those who avoid.

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The adequacy of the sample was assessed using the information power criterion: the sample was highly relevant to the question, and it was analyzed using established theory (Malterud et al., 2016). All participants shared similar institutional opportunities, including student councils, Model United Nations (MUN), and volunteering. This provided a useful basis for comparing how students responded differently to similar leadership opportunities. The analysis was therefore not just about the availability of opportunities but also about how the students interpreted and responded to them.

Table 1

Participant Characteristics

Code	Age	Sex	Grade	School	Leadership engagement
P1	17	F	12	Private	Active
P2	18	M	12	Private	Avoidant
P3	18	M	12	Private	Withdrawn
P4	17	F	11	Private	Active
P5	17	M	12	Private	Active
P6	17	M	12	Private	Selective
P7	17	M	12	Private	Active
P8	18	M	12	Private	Avoidant
P9	18	M	12	Private	Selective
P10	15	F	9	Private	Active
P11	14	M	10	Private	Active
P12	17	F	12	Private	Active:
P13	15	F	9	Private	Selective
P14	14	M	9	Private	Active
P15	18	M	12	Private	Active
P16	17	F	11	Private	Withdrawn
P17	17	M	12	Private	Active
P18	16	F	10	Private	Selective
P19	18	M	12	Private	Withdrawn
P20	17	M	11	Private	Withdrawn

3.3 Data Collection

Data were gathered through individual, semi-structured interviews. The interview guide covered eight distinct domains to capture both the internal and external factors. It started with the participants' views on leadership and the factors that make a good leader. It also covered their strengths or limitations. It then looked at their eagerness to offer or take on responsibility, the motivation behind reluctance to do so, what they value in making their decision to take on responsibility, and how they respond to praise and success. The remaining sections investigated their motivation to lead, family attitudes toward failure and leadership

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roles, perceived school fairness, barriers, if any, and more ideas about community. At the end of each interview, participants were asked why they think that generally Pakistani youth do not aspire to lead.

Students selected their preferred language, resulting in a mix of Urdu and English. All interviews were recorded and transcribed with formal permission from participants. Then, detailed participant summaries were created to capture specific verbatim statements and help in data familiarization. These basic summaries and all the full transcripts were used to analyse the data.

3.4 Analysis

The data analysis used the six-phase approach for reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2021).

Data familiarization began with multiple readings of the entire dataset, and then initial codes relevant to the research questions were generated. These were then grouped into candidate themes and then checked against the whole dataset to name these codes. They were developed in accordance with Braun and Clarke's (2019) principles, which emphasized identifying underlying patterns of shared meaning rather than simple topic summaries. For example, the theme regarding the 'readiness rule' cut across participants' descriptions of volunteering, perfectionism, and decision-making.

Inter-rater reliability scores were not included as reflexive thematic analysis views the researcher's interpretation as the instrument of the study. Rather, a detailed reflexive log was employed in tracking and challenging analytical decisions throughout. The sincerity, credibility, and rich description of the overall quality of the study were adhered to by the framework developed by Tracy (2010). Finally, the Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Research (COREQ) checklist (Tong et al., 2007) provided a structural foundation for transparent reporting.

3.5 Reflexivity

The researcher was an 'insider', a school-going student of the same age group as the participants. This served as a significant asset for building rapport and allowed participants to talk in detail and comfortably to a peer. This also reduced social desirability bias, especially while discussing sensitive internal barriers like fear of failure. The analytical risks, however, of being an insider also introduced clear analytical risks, primarily over-identification with the data and the potential projection of personal academic experiences onto the participants' accounts. These risks were addressed through deliberate reflexive measures throughout the analysis. Each candidate theme was cross-checked against verbatim extracts across a variety of candidate transcripts to ensure that the interpretation remained grounded in the participants' accounts.

Furthermore, the author deliberately looked for disconfirming evidence in the sample rather than assuming that all accounts supported the emerging themes. This was particularly true for P8, whose avoidance of leadership roles was driven by a preference for behind-the-scenes administrative tasks rather than a fear-based internal barrier. Finally, a degree of active interrogation and recording of gender-related potential biases, resulting from the male-biased sample in a patriarchal region, was achieved, aiming to keep the analysis fully transparent.

3.6 Ethics

Participation in this study was completely voluntary. Before starting any recruitment, formal institutional clearance was secured from the participating school administrations. Furthermore, the sample comprised individuals under the legal age of 18, so a dual-consent procedure was employed. This included parental informed consent for all minor participants, paired with verbal informed assent from participants themselves. Participants aged 18 provided independent informed consent.

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All identifying institutional and personal data were deleted from the final text, and only alphanumeric codes (P1 to P20) were used to represent participants in the study. Furthermore, direct references to local public figures or recognizable regional events mentioned during the interviews were also rewritten to prevent deductive identification. All participants retained the right to decline any specific question or withdraw from the interview at any stage without facing any consequences. Finally, since the author is among his peers, care was taken in the invitation process to ensure that the recruitment was not under any social pressure or peer expectations.

4. Findings

All 20 transcripts from the interviews were analyzed, and the six themes were identified. The subsequent interviews generally confirm the pattern identified in previous interviews, and the full set of 20 interviews was included in the analysis. Not every participant is quoted separately. The quotations below are selected as representative examples of recurring patterns. The themes below capture both the structural constraints and internalized psychological barriers experienced by school-going adolescents.

The table below shows 6 themes developed.

Theme	Core mechanism	Category
1. Fear of Judgment and Failure	Fear of criticism suppresses action	Internal
2. Unstable Self-Worth	Achievement does not stabilize self-belief	Internal
3. The Readiness Rule	Students wait for certainty before acting	Internal
4. Cost-Benefit Calculation	Perceived cost outweighs perceived value	Internal
5. Family as Amplifier or Buffer	Family feedback strengthens or weakens barriers	External
6. Gatekeeping	Favoritism, age bias, and role concentration restrict access	External

This study intentionally prioritizes the first four internal psychological themes over the final two external structural themes. This sequence is similar to what was shared by participants themselves. As in the sample, the internal barriers were identified as the most significant challenge students face. P3 stated that the barriers we face are more inside than the ones outside. Thus, the following themes focus in depth on internalized psychological barriers before addressing the broader institutional structures that reinforce them.

4.1 Theme 1: Fear of Judgment and Failure as the Dominant Internal Brake

The fear of judgement was the most common internal barrier faced by almost all participants. This fear also served as paralyzing rather than mild hesitation in those participants who had completely withdrawn. This was prominent in P2, who had a range of ideas about leadership engagement, received from a highly politically active family. Yet, he totally avoided any engagement himself. He was avoiding it because of the fear he had developed of damaging his image and making mistakes in public.

This fear worked alongside a deep-rooted belief that one is not as capable, which results in recommending others or waiting for others to perform that task. This pattern was prominent in the account of P3. He initially marked his lack of engagement as a lack of talent, and then later revealed a deeper truth that the real reason was fear of failure. He openly admitted: *" People don't really care about what others do, and the fear we face is mostly internal; in reality, it's nothing like that"*

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This fear affects not only those who avoid, but also those who were actively contributing to leadership activities, including the most skilled and experienced student leader among the whole sample, P5. He admitted that the greatest hurdle he faced was fear of external judgement, which was reinforced by the critical environment he faced.

For P4, the threat of criticism from older community members became an invisible barrier that actively prevented her from speaking up in crucial moments. Even P10, exhibiting high confidence at a young age, admitted that it has been a challenge for him to deal with fear of external judgement.

The distinction between active leaders and those who avoid was a matter of how they control these fears. P7 managed this fear through an evolution. He admitted that when he was younger, any leadership role felt like torture and caused him to flee. The repeated exposure to multiple leadership opportunities relieved that fear in him.

In contrast, active leaders like P6 and P9 navigated this environment by building a strong shield around there self worth, claiming that no one holds any say over it. This pattern is similar to the self-worth protection model of fear of failure, which involves complete avoidance as an emotional strategy to defend oneself from the intense shame of failure (De Castella et al., 2013). The findings show that this internal brake is not an intrinsic mechanism, but a learned, intensely socialized brake mechanism that influences how participants in this study view their own potential.

4.2 Theme 2: Unstable Self-Worth: Better Than Others, Yet Not Good Enough

A pattern that appeared in participants who had withdrawn was a sense of unearned superiority, which was clearly conveyed by P3, who stated that he feels like he is better at leading than others and has superior skills, but still he mostly thinks he is not capable enough. Similarly, P5 admitted that

> *"Sometimes I feel I am better than others, but sometimes I also doubt if I am good enough."*

These paradoxes were clearly noticed by students, and they live this reality. Viewing from self-efficacy, this instability is an indicator of what occurs when an individual's sense of worth is based on what others think and believe, rather than on accumulated, internal mastery (Bandura, 1997). This leaves adolescents' self-worth heavily open to the next piece of feedback they receive.

This turns self-worth into a variable that can fluctuate.

Imposter syndrome acted as an invisible tax on the achievement of these participants. P3 felt uncomfortable when praised. He mostly believed that he did not deserve it. He feared that others might find out that he is not as capable as they believe, and this fear held him back.

This is an example of what happens when you embody impostor syndrome (Clance & Imes, 1978).

P2 feared that others would lose all respect for him if they found out his weaknesses. This fear generated a crushing pressure to be perfect. This made leadership opportunities highly dangerous psychological traps. Even among the safe student leaders, a healthier form of this discomfort appeared. P9 deflected public praise, stating: *"I didn't do it alone — I don't deserve this."*

P4 and P6 said that they felt guilt when they were given credit they did not deserve or for group work.

4.3 Theme 3: The Readiness Rule: Waiting for Certainty Versus Learning by Doing

Participants were sharply split on one decision rule: how prepared they must feel to take on a leadership position. And this level was set way too high for individuals who had held back or completely withdrawn. These participants demanded absolute certainty before taking on any role. This was clearly seen in the case of P3, who stated that he would only agree to lead if he was 100% certain he could do it. Even if a hint of uncertainty was there, he would have

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withdrawn from the role. The same was reported by P2, who always waited until he felt ready enough. Since that feeling rarely came in the school environment, he rarely volunteered. P9 confessed to doing so, as he only accepted leadership invitations that he thought were at his ability level, not exceeding them.

In contrast, those who were actively involved rejected the idea of perfection, refusing to wait for it.

P1 stated directly:

> *"Everyone is good at something… I will take the role and learn side by side through experience."*

Similarly, P11 said he doesn't wait for the right time to feel perfectly ready; instead, he does what he can and learns and adapts along the way. P4 and P7 described the same "learning-by-doing" mindset, viewing action itself as a way to build confidence, not the goal.

These two principles set up very different psychological feedback mechanisms that have an active influence on students' future potential. Action taken before absolute certainty provides mastery experiences, which self-efficacy theory identifies as the most powerful factor in building internal confidence (Bandura, 1997). Otherwise, those experiences will not occur if we wait for complete certainty.

Consequently, students are never granted the opportunity to grow in self-assurance and stay in a constant state of anticipation. Moreover, these guidelines are directly related to students' basic beliefs about human potential. For the participant who learned by doing, leadership was considered a skill gained from hands-on experiences. Implicitly, certainty seekers saw every leadership opportunity as an assessment of a stable and unchangeable capability, and feared that they would be quickly disabused of their belief that their capability was manifesting itself in a failure in the public eye (Dweck, 2006).

4.4 Theme 4: Leadership as a Cost-Benefit Calculation

The predominant internal barriers throughout the data set were emotion based-driven through fear. A second, distinct pattern emerged among participants: evaluation of personal costs and benefits of leadership. The most obvious example of this pathway is P8. He serves as the main disconfirming subject of the study. He came from an affluent, highly supportive family, and he was educated at a prestigious school that provided him with plenty of opportunities. P8 reported that he has no fear of public criticism or fear of failure. He fully recognizes his own capabilities and had quite a bit of experience with leadership roles. But he routinely turned down leadership roles, and his reason was simple: he is too lazy and wants to avoid hard work. Basically saying he is an introvert. P8 viewed leadership as a waste of effort, bringing him no reward. He only accepted when it served his personal goals. This calculation appeared almost across all simple tasks, which reveals a hidden layer of emotional labor among adolescents.

P2 routinely addressed whether a role was " worth the energy", and he withdrew when the workload became too much. He also withdrew when the output he was getting out of it was not enough. This was also seen even among the most active student leaders. P6 and P10. They only accepted those roles that fit exactly with their long-term career goals. They chose to avoid roles that demanded heavy effort and gave little reward in return. Viewed from expectancy-value theory, non-participation in this context was not due to low self-efficacy or low expectation of success, but it is because of relatively low subjective task value relative to personal cost (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002).

4.5 Theme 5: Family as Amplifier or Buffer

Participants' barriers seemed to be magnified or mitigated in family environments. At one end of this spectrum were parents who normalized failure. P7's father told him to fail more, and he constantly told him to learn from it, which helped him overcome the social anxiety he

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faced in childhood and made himself most active student leader. Similarly, when P1 doubted her abilities, her parents encouraged her and treated her mistakes as learning.

At the other end of the spectrum was the family environment that served as a source of reinforcing inner uncertainty. P5 reported that his family actively mocked his leadership efforts. Moreover,r he received no assistance from them in case of failure. He also blamed these factors for his lack of self-respect. This treatment did not affect P5's behaviour towards leadership. He continued leading and remained highly active in school. But it infected the internal self-beliefs beneath his achievements. P5 suffered from chronic performance anxiety. He also carried the belief that his background disqualifies him from elite spaces.

P2's parents encouraged him to develop his leadership skills, but just in theory, and told him to focus on studies during exams. Once, they told him not to participate in an event because they thought he would lose, and they wanted to protect him from the emotional pain of the loss.

Protection of this kind was no different than hostility, only gentle: the underlying message remained the same that the adolescent was too weak to handle failure. Meanwhile, P11's parents appreciated his efforts, but they did not understand the importance of leadership. That meant they had to constantly negotiate before they would give permission. These correspond to major sources of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997). Families do not just observe their children lead; they provide valuable support.

4.6 Theme 6: Gatekeeping: Favoritism, Age Bias, the Single-Leader System

External barriers were a reality in participants' lives. They did not operate alone; rather, they operated by actively feeding and reinforcing the students' internal psychological anxieties.

In the school setting, the main problem was not that the opportunities were not enough. But it was the biased allocation of those roles. A toxic mix of favoritism and gender preferences was revealed by P2, and it kept key leadership roles for top-ranked academic students. P3, P5, P9, P10, and P11 confirmed that it was commonplace to favour certain groups of students. In the case of P5, this system extracted a heavy relational tax, since he could not do the student-led initiatives unless he was in "good standing" with the school staff, which he wasn't.

P2 internalized a decision that did not made im MUN president as an act of profound disrespect. This one decision eroded his willingness to volunteer again, making it obvious that an external preventing event became an internal one. Outside of the school gates, participants encountered community-level age bias that positioned adolescents as less capable whenever they attempted to take charge (P5, P6, P8, P10, P11).

P3 revealed that in his social background, he tended to be surrounded by people who didn't consider youths to be capable of being leaders in any manner. Additionally, P3 was able to link this negative sentiment of society into his own negative mindset of "Leadership is not for someone like me." This offers an example where the message from the oppressor becomes the student's inner voice (Freire, 1970).

Moreover, the data uncovered a destructive structural mechanism that P11 hypothesized as "labeling". In this setting, the institutions tend to select one elite student leader and assign the role of "follower" to other students. The non-chosen students then slowly stop taking part in any leadership activity. P9 independently reported the same phenomenon with peers. An inadequate educational system that honours a single exceptional student and omits leadership opportunities for the majority of students (Hart, 1992).

Lastly, the lack of mentorship made this structure worse. Of the 20 participants, 18 didn't have an adult mentor, forcing them to navigate their anxieties through podcasts, online media, or older siblings. The only exception that was found was the structural rule: P7, whose father was a university professor capable of providing an immediate, supportive adult network, was also the single participant who most completely dismantled his internal barriers.

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5. Discussion

The findings and implications of the empirical analysis presented indicate that youth non-participation is a web or interconnected chain of barriers, not a list of individual barriers.

When it comes to adolescent capability, restrictive messages are constantly broadcast, such as through external barriers including age bias, favoritism, feedback from family members, and the single-leader model. Youth internalize these external messages and turn them into beliefs regarding their abilities, deeply seated fears, and limiting rules about what they can do. When these internal psychological states are created, they affect behavior to some extent, regardless of the external circumstances that gave rise to them. This internal autonomy helps to explain why P3 consistently avoided leadership positions that his extremely supportive parents offered him, and why P8's available institutional opportunities were completely neglected.

This study is different from past studies in 3 unique ways.

1. The fear of judgment is the most common internal barrier within the dataset, impacting active leaders and having a strong influence on withdrawn individuals. The presence of this anxiety significantly supports the self-worth protection model of failure (De Castella et al., 2013). This warns against the use of motivational messages, telling youth that leadership develops their skills. These are not enough to overcome deeply entrenched fear that is logically incorrect.
2. The presence of unearned superiority as well as great inadequacy within single participants such as P3 and P5 shows that there is a lack of clarity about the impostor phenomenon. However, it appears as an extremely fragile self-worth that is constantly affected by social comparison and external feedback—consistent with a lack of internal mastery that leads to self-efficacy beliefs (Bandura, 1997; Clance & Imes, 1978).
3. The 'readiness rule' is a behavioral cue that distinguishes those who are active leaders and those who avoid within this sample. This guideline offers a significantly more viable target for institutional action than self-confidence. This mechanism is a localized example of the way in which external oppression of others became an inner dialogue, connecting structural gatekeeping with Freire's (1970) concept of internalized subordination.

This study includes only one participant who views youth passivity as mere "laziness". In that particular case (P8), the behavior was better understood as a cost-benefit analysis (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002) rather than an inherent character defect. The traditional institutional perspective that approaches youth participation as a supply-side issue overlooks all of the disengaged participants. The programs that focus solely on the supply side and do not address issues of unfair allocation, negative feedback from family, and fear will always affect youth. This pattern mirrors Hart's (1992) tokenism issue in a smaller context, highlighting one young leader while deliberately limiting opportunities for the unseen majority.

A clear framework of practical interventions arises from this cohesive structure. Schools need to intentionally move away from single-leader systems to break the readiness rule 5and lessen performance anxiety. Moreover, institutions should adopt compulsory rotation, announce how leaders are selected, or divide posts to avoid any sense of favoritism, and design low-stakes leadership experiments where failure is anticipated as a learning experience and do not impose any structural penalties. It is important to note that the implementation of adult mentorship is a key factor,r as it is either entirely missing or present in one case in the whole study. Parental engagement programs should address the negative pattern of protective discouragement into a pattern of protective encouragement. Strikingly, the participants themselves suggested structural measures that were highly congruent with each other and proposed to break new ground in the future.

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6. Limitations

There are four limitations to this study.

1. The sample mainly consisted of males, had an urban majority, and was mainly drawn from private educational institutions. Consequently, the particular leadership challenges faced by female adolescent students in rural communities and those attending public schools, which were identified by several participants as far more severe, remain underrepresented in the data.
2. The empirical results are completely based on subjective experiences of internal psychological states and family interaction. This would raise the question of social desirability or retrospective bias, because participants may report more thoughtfully or more stressed they were in situations than they actually are in their regular life.
3. Only single interviews were used to gather data. Internal barriers such as fear of criticism and fluctuating self-esteem evolve and would be better captured with a longitudinal research design.
4. The entire research process, from recruitment to analysis, was carried out by a single researcher who operates as a peer to the participants. The use of strict reflexive approaches were used to maintain analytical distance from the data, but a collaborative research team would have added to the interpretive richness of the data set. Hence, these results are explicitly aimed at providing contextual transferability in the form of deep theoretical understanding as opposed to statistical generalizability to the larger Pakistani population.

7. Conclusion

Leadership withdrawal was not just a result of structural opportunity, but was also influenced by internalized messages concerning age, failure, and capability among those participating in this study. The fragile self-esteem flactuting from false sense of superiority and a crushing feeling of inferiority, with a ‘readiness guideline’ that postpones any leadership engagement until there is 100% certainty. Moreover, other students decide against any involvement because the emotional and academic costs outweigh the benefits of leadership engagement.

In conclusion, it is necessary to reshape the institutions, particularly for the implementation of fair rotations and organized adult mentorship. Solely relying on structural supply-side intervention is fundamentally inadequate. To effectively address the leadership potential of youth in Punjab, both external and internal barriers must be addressed simultaneously.

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