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SPECIAL ISSUE ARTICLE

Out-of-school time use in Pakistan: A qualitative study featuring youth's voices

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Abstract

The current study addresses the lack of out-of-school time (OST) research in low- and middle-income countries by exploring OST use in the context of Pakistan and incorporating youth's voices. Using a qualitative descriptive design with focus-group discussions, we conducted a study in three middle schools set in low- to middle-income neighborhoods in urban and rural areas of Karachi, Pakistan. We engaged 86 youth (50% girls; aged 10–15 years) that were purposefully selected from grade six (31.4%), seven (44.2%) and eight (24.4%) classrooms, balancing gender and locality. In each focus group, we asked participants to describe their afterschool activity routine on a typical weekday afternoon until bedtime. Digital recordings of discussions were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using content analysis. Based on sixteen focus groups with five to six participants in each group, we identified eight distinct categories: religious activities, schoolwork, screentime, helping adult family members, family time, outdoor play, indoor leisure activities, and hanging out with friends. We found that structured activities (e.g., religious activities and schoolwork supervised by an adult) were reported more frequently than unstructured activities (e.g., outdoor play and family time). Participation in activities varied by gender and location (i.e., urban vs. rural), highlighting disparities associated with the sociocultural context that marginalized youth face. Our findings provide a glimpse into the everyday lives of Pakistani youth outside of school. Additionally, they elucidate how economic resources, sociocultural norms regarding gender, and community safety shape youth's time use and socialization patterns. Findings from this study can inform the development of OST activities and initiatives aimed at promoting the positive development of Pakistani youth.

KEYWORDS

gender differences, lower-middle-income country, out-of-school, Pakistan, qualitative study, time use, youth

INTRODUCTION

Children and adolescents spend roughly half of their waking hours outside formal school environments (Larson & Verma, 1999). The hours before and after school are referred to as out-of-school time (OST) and are widely recognized as an important context for positive youth development (PYD) (Bodilly & Beckett, 2005; Eccles et al., 2003; Larson, 2000). Our current knowledge about OST and the

role it plays in providing opportunities for promoting PYD has mainly been established through research in Western contexts, primarily reflecting the experiences of young people in North America and Europe (Geldhof et al., 2021; Henrich et al., 2010; Spencer & Spencer, 2014). Research from other geographical regions and cultural contexts, including low-and middle-income countries (LMICs), is largely missing (Chowa et al., 2023; Lerner et al., 2021; Wium & Dimitrova, 2019). Such research, however, is

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needed to understand how young people in non-Western cultures spend their time outside school and how it relates to their positive development (Leman et al., 2017; Wium & Dimitrova, 2019; Wuermler et al., 2015). The goal of this study was to examine the OST experiences of children and youth in Pakistan. Considering the larger sociocultural context (e.g., gender norms, rurality of living), our aim was to understand the types of structured and unstructured OST activities young people in Pakistan engage in, and their experiences during the activities.

Over 90% of the world's children and youth grow up in LMICs (United Nations, 2022). To date, child and youth development research in LMICs has mostly focused on estimating and reducing the burden of diseases and mitigating risk and problem behaviors (Ben-Arieh, 2008; Blum & Boyden, 2018; Catalano et al., 2019). Since the advent of Global Sustainability Goals in 2015, researchers and child-serving organizations (e.g., World Health Organization [WHO], UNICEF) have emphasized the importance of exploring factors that contribute to PYD and wellbeing in LMICs (e.g., Lansford et al., 2019; Raikes et al., 2017; Verma & Petersen, 2018). Most youth in these countries face challenges such as poverty, social discrimination and marginalization, alongside a heavier burden of responsibilities (Blum & Boyden, 2018; Cooper et al., 2019; Espinoza-Revollo & Porter, 2018). Thus, global research on PYD is needed to provide a strength-based perspective on the lives of youth in LMICs that can be leveraged to support thriving (Wium & Dimitrova, 2019).

Pakistan is an LMIC where a general understanding of the factors that contribute to PYD, including OST use, is at an emergent stage (Dimitrova et al., 2021; Sathar et al., 2016; UNICEF Pakistan, 2020). The potential for supporting child and youth development through PYD programs has been noted and a need for institutional planning in out-of-school settings to create empowering programs for youth has been recognized (Sathar et al., 2016; United Nations Development Programme Pakistan, 2017). However, concrete steps are yet to be taken (Lloyd & Grant, 2005; Sathar et al., 2016). To inform such efforts, research is needed to understand how Pakistani youth spend their time outside school, and how OST can be used to create opportunities for their positive development.

Positive youth development and low-and-middle-income countries

Research on PYD aims to identify life skills (Duerden et al., 2012) and developmental assets (Benson et al., 2006) that are important for youth's success and wellbeing. Several frameworks have been proposed that model the processes and characteristics related to PYD, including the Search Institute's *40 Developmental Assets* (Benson et al., 1998), Lerner's *5Cs Model* (Lerner et al., 2005), and Catalano and colleagues' *15 PYD Constructs* (Catalano et al., 2004). These frameworks have been developed and

implemented in Western contexts, and mainly model the PYD trajectories of White, middle-class, English-speaking youth, favoring individualistic values and material wellbeing (Lerner et al., 2021; Spencer & Spencer, 2014). Scholars have criticized that the applicability of PYD research and frameworks to understand and promote youth wellbeing in non-Western contexts, including LMICs, may be limited (Cooper et al., 2019; Henrich et al., 2010; Spencer & Spencer, 2014).

An emergent body of research shows that assets prioritized for positive development vary by sociocultural context. For instance, in LMICs like Ghana and Turkey, studies with youth have shown a higher appreciation of qualities like *connection, character, and caring*—PYD elements derived from the 5Cs Model (Wong et al., 2022). These attributes align with the local culture that value group harmony and interdependence. In contrast, youth in high-income countries like Norway and Portugal tended to emphasize *competence and confidence*, reflecting cultures that value individual autonomy, independence and achievement (Fernandes et al., 2021). In Latin America and Asia, where family values are emphasized, research has demonstrated significant associations between high levels of *connectedness* and elevated self-concept (Dutra-Thomé et al., 2019). Notably, constructive use of OST was the least commonly experienced external asset reported by youth in LMICs, signaling a need for further research (Fernandes et al., 2021; Scales et al., 2017; Wium & Kozina, 2021). Overall, these findings underscore the need for country-specific research that incorporates the voices of youth to help shed light on day-to-day experiences that influence development. Qualitative studies are needed as they remain limited and can amplify and authenticate youth voices (Geldhof et al., 2021; Lansford et al., 2019).

Out-of-school time as a context for promoting positive youth development

Positive youth development (PYD) as a process comprising skills and attributes needed for youth to succeed has been studied in relation to how adolescents spend their time outside of school (e.g., Eccles et al., 2003; Jellicic et al., 2016; Larson, 2001). Scholars and practitioners emphasize that young people flourish when they have access to resources (e.g., parents, teachers, coaches, program leaders, faith leaders, and formal and informal mentors) and opportunities (e.g., sports, music, arts, community service) in the places they live (Benson et al., 2006; Pittman et al., 2001). Indeed, research suggests that informal and experiential learning environments at home or in community settings are important for youth to develop the skills and assets necessary for their success (Pittman, 2017; Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003). Out-of-school time (OST) has been identified as a critical context for development as it offers opportunities for young people to engage in activities that shape their social, emotional, physical, and academic growth (Bodilly & Beckett, 2005; Eccles et al., 2003).

OST activities are comprised of structured and unstructured activities. Structured activities, such as participation in afterschool clubs or programs, community services, and sports, are organized and supervised by an adult; unstructured activities are chosen freely based on personal interest, like watching television, free play, and socializing with peers without adult supervision (Bartko & Eccles, 2003; Sharp et al., 2015). Research shows that youth participation in structured OST activities provides opportunities for fostering positive peer and adult connections and developing a sense of agency and belonging to a group (Eccles et al., 2003) and is linked to positive educational (grades, achievement tests, attainment, high school completion), social (peer relations, parental relations), and health (reduced substance use, reduced teen pregnancy) outcomes (Bodilly & Beckett, 2005; Lauer et al., 2006). While the structured and organized activities have been a primary focus in PYD research, several studies have shown that free time spent in unstructured recreational activities is also associated with positive experiences such as fun, relaxation, and creativity (Lehto & Eskelinen, 2020). Scholars argue that unstructured forms of leisure offer an ideal setting for exploration and enhance decision-making and problem-solving skills in youth (Bartko & Eccles, 2003; Sharp et al., 2015).

Out-of-school time use in low-and-middle-income countries

Emergent research on OST in LMICs suggests distinct patterns in activity engagement based on gender, location, and socioeconomic status. In a comparative analysis of adolescent time use in five developing countries in South Asia and Africa, Lloyd et al. (2008) found that adolescent girls tended to carry a heavier workload and had less leisure time than boys. This pattern was consistent with research conducted in Bangladesh, India, and Pakistan, where girls were more involved in housework, family caring, and structured activities, and boys spent more time on leisurely pursuits during OST (Amin & Chandrasekhar, 2012; Lloyd & Grant, 2005; Verma et al., 2002). Considering rurality of living, findings from the Young Lives cohort study in Ethiopia, India, Peru, and Vietnam showed that in comparison to youth in urban areas, rural youth spent longer hours working and less time on education (Espinoza-Revollo & Porter, 2018). Country-specific studies confirm that within LMICs, socioeconomic factors such as household poverty, parental education, and school enrollment significantly determine how children and youth use their time outside school (Alhassan et al., 2017; Amin & Chandrasekhar, 2012). Overall, research shows that OST varies between and within LMICs. To create actionable research that informs PYD through OST use, there is a need for context-and country-specific OST research that is culturally sensitive and considers gender norms, geographic location, and socioeconomic conditions.

Out-of-school time use and positive youth development in the context of Pakistan

Pakistan is the sixth most populous country in the world, with 39% of the population under age 18 and a human development index ranking in the fourth-lowest quartile worldwide (UNICEF Pakistan, 2017). Pakistan is an LMIC in urgent need of strategies focused on improving the lives of children and youth. Calls to research into children's lives and time use in Pakistan grew in the 1990s due to concerns about child labor (Jabeen, 2009). The last couple of decades have been marked by economic, and political, turmoil, and the social problems faced by children and youth in the country have been emphasized (Ahmed & Zaman, 2019; Mughal, 2021). Strength-based research focusing on the positive development and wellbeing of children and youth in Pakistan is more important than ever. There is a growing need to utilize a PYD framework in the research and work with youth in Pakistan to build resilience, confidence, agency and purpose, and create opportunities that support their healthy development.

Historically, research in Pakistan has been conducted *on* children from the perspective of adults (Jabeen, 2009). A small number of child-led studies have been conducted *with* Pakistani children, incorporating the voices and perspectives of children and youth into research on matters that affect them (Jabeen, 2009). Specifically, Jabeen used a child-centered methodology to investigate the lives of Pakistani children who live on the streets to ensure that they were given a voice and had control over the research process. This yielded deep insights and rich findings to inform policy in ways that mattered to children. However, although children and youth have been shown to be valuable informants in research (Christensen & James, 2008), child-centered approaches remain rare in research in Pakistan.

Pakistani youth grow up in a larger societal context characterized by many challenges that compromise their wellbeing. High poverty rates, inadequate safety, and limited access to basic facilities, such as healthcare and education, are just a few of the difficulties they encounter in their everyday lives (Lloyd & Grant, 2005; Sathar et al., 2016). Arguably, these challenges are rooted in the British colonial rule in the Indian subcontinent (former India, Pakistan and Bangladesh) that lasted for nearly two centuries (Lange, 2004). Through its subjugation of traditional, and indigenous institutions and imposition of authoritarian and capitalist regimes, the colonial rule created significant inequities within this south-Asian society (Ahmed & Tamoor, 2021; Saif, 2008). Moreover, after exploiting natural and human resources, the rulers left the region without the adequate infrastructure and systems required for socioeconomic growth and human development (Ahmed & Tamoor, 2021; Lange, 2004; Saif, 2008). Despite several decades of independence, Pakistan has not yet overcome the colonial legacy of prioritizing military spending over social and public services, which in the present day is translated into weak public institution systems; making

safety, education, and healthcare privileges rather than basic rights (Lloyd & Grant, 2005; UNICEF Pakistan, 2017).

Furthermore, opportunities for non-academic pursuits, such as leisure, sports, extracurricular activities, afterschool clubs, and programs for developing social-emotional skills are severely limited for youth (Abro et al., 2015; Faizunnisa & Ikram, 2006). The concept of after-school programs is widely missing, and children are primarily cared for by (mostly female) family members at home. A shortage of designated outdoor spaces in urban planning such as parks and playgrounds, coupled with safety concerns, further hinder outdoor recreational activities.

An urban and rural divide intensifying the socioeconomic class system (poor, middle, and rich) further exacerbates existing inequities for Pakistan's youth (Jabeen, 2009; Zaidi, 2014). Given their financial means, privileged urban youth often have access to opportunities like recreational programs, sports training, arts and music classes, and academic instruction during their after-school hours. A fraction of youth benefit from community-level programs such as Girl Guides and Boy Scouts. Islamic education centers, known as madrassahs, are widespread but fall short of adequately addressing the skill development needs necessary for contemporary success.

Another feature of Pakistani society is its cultural orientation and value system that emphasize ways of being and behaviors that promote group harmony and social bonding (Lloyd & Grant, 2005; Zaman et al., 2006). However, when combined with patriarchal ideology, this results in an unequal power structure and a lower status of women (Hamid & Ahmed, 2011; Vandello, 2016). This hierarchical social system in Pakistan affords men more power and freedom while women experience restrictions in mobility and decision-making, and young girls become an especially vulnerable youth group (Hamid & Ahmed, 2011; Lloyd & Grant, 2005). Relatedly, the country's post-colonial status, unstable governance, and weak economic landscape further impact youth identity, attitudes, and behaviors, shaping their narratives of hope and frustration (Sathar et al., 2016; Zaidi, 2014). Therefore, programs promoting PYD in Pakistan must be rooted in research that reflects the contextual realities of the day-to-day lives of youth in Pakistani society.

The current study

The purpose of this study was to address the lack of OST research in LMICs by investigating: How do children and youth in Pakistan spend their weekday afternoon after school is out? What are the different kinds of activities in which they engage? We conducted a descriptive qualitative exploration that incorporated the voices of Pakistani youth. Ben-Arieh (2005) argued that children should be involved “in measuring and monitoring their own wellbeing” (p. 574). Correspondingly, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, Article 12, states that children are full-fledged persons who have the right to express their views in all matters affecting them and requires that

those views be heard and given due weight in accordance with the child's age and maturity. Consistent with this approach, we engaged boys and girls in rural and urban settings in Pakistan in focus group discussions (FGDs). Findings from this study add to the limited research on OST use in LMICs and can inform efforts to enhance OST programs and services to better meet the needs of youth in Pakistan.

Positionality

We approached this study as an interdisciplinary team of researchers from Pakistan and Canada with expertise in public health, educational psychology, and childhood education. Our team brought diverse expertise and interests to this study, ranging from pedagogical, psychological, psychometric, and community-based research. The lead author (SK) is a Pakistani woman who grew up in Karachi, Pakistan, and worked for many years with children and families in rural and urban areas of Karachi before moving to Canada. Data collection was carried out by SK in collaboration with local research team members, MI and UH, (under the supervision of AP). The team was native to Pakistani culture and fluent in English and Urdu. They led data transcription and analysis and guided the interpretation of the findings. SK, MI, and TM prepared the first draft of the manuscript. The full research team periodically engaged in discussion and reflexivity to reflect on how the group was influencing the data collection, analysis, and findings. AG, RK, and EO, researchers from a large, research-intensive university in western Canada, provided guidance and mentorship during all stages of research, contributed to discussions about the analyses and findings, and edited the manuscript.

METHOD

Setting

The study was implemented in select public and private schools in Karachi, Pakistan, from November 2021 to January 2022. In Pakistan, school systems are divided into private and government schools, with the latter providing education to nearly 62% of school-age children enrolled in schools (Shah et al., 2021). Each school includes primary (grades 1–5), middle (grades 6–8), secondary (grades 9 and 10), or higher secondary (grades 11 and 12) levels. Participants in this study came from three middle schools representing the private and public education systems. Schools were selected based on local investigators' connections and based on contextual factors such as the type of school system, population dynamics, and feasibility.

Karachi is Pakistan's largest and most populous city, with over 16.8 million ethnolinguistically diverse residents. Approximately 75% of households in Karachi belong to the low- and middle-income group, with an average monthly income of about USD 150 (Shams et al., 2020). Considering Karachi's complex social dynamics, we used principles of

maximum variation sampling (Creswell & Poth, 2018) to purposefully select schools situated in low-to-middle-income neighborhoods in urban and peri-urban settings. We identified and accessed these schools by leveraging our collaboration with scholars at the Aga Khan University's Institute of Educational Development (AKU-IED), Karachi, which supports local schools with educational reforms and professional development training. Given the lack of empirical data measuring an association between school socioeconomic status (SES) and neighborhood SES, we relied on practical knowledge and consultations with local educational authorities to guide our use of neighborhood SES as a proxy for students' SES. The final sampling frame of schools included a public school with a co-education system located on the outskirts of Karachi, and two private urban schools with gender-segregated education systems located in densely populated centers of the city. Table 1 provides an overview of the demographics for each school. Capturing this diversity in sample was in line with the approach of descriptive inquiry and facilitated the capturing of diverse voices. Data were collected during school hours in a private room inside the school building.

Participants

A total of 86 youth (50% girls) between 10 and 15 years old participated in this study. The participants were students in grades six ($n = 27$, 31.4%), seven ($n = 38$, 44.2%), and eight ($n = 21$, 24.4%). Grade level was used as a proxy for age.

Procedures

Recruitment

Formal invitations and material describing the study were sent to the heads of selected schools. After receiving approval from the school heads, the research team contacted children in eligible classrooms by distributing study flyers and consent forms for guardians in Urdu (the local language). Students were given 1 week to return the signed consent forms. Guardians and students who wanted more information could contact the research

team (via phone or email) for clarification. Upon receiving a list of students who received guardian consent, students were separated by gender and selected randomly through balloting within each classroom to ensure fair selection. Conducting separate FGDs for boys and girls is consistent with cultural norms in Pakistan. As a sign of appreciation, we provided participation certificates and small tokens (e.g., bookmarks) to the participants in the end of the study.

Data collection

A total of 16 in-person FGDs were conducted in Urdu with five to six students per group to promote favorable dynamics for open discussion and a comfortable environment for participants to share their experiences (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2009). The FGDs were facilitated by two of the three trained field research team members (SK, MI, and UH), lasted between 20 and 40 min, and were recorded digitally. FGDs took place in a separate room in the school building and COVID-19 safety protocols were followed. Prior to the start of a FGD, the moderator explained the study, read aloud the assent form to the participants, clarified questions, and indicated the participants' approval (assent) in writing. Participants were informed that their responses would be recorded and kept confidential. No identifying or demographic information was collected to ensure anonymity.

A semi-structured interview guide with relevant probes was used to guide the FGDs. Participants were asked to describe their weekday activities after leaving school until they went to sleep at night. After this initial open-ended question, the facilitator gave prompts, asked follow-up questions, or sought clarification if needed. The facilitator ensured that all children had a chance to contribute to the discussion. The research team conducted a debriefing session after each FGD to reflect on critical elements of the interview and discussed the notes taken by their team members capturing non-verbal aspects of children's perspectives during the interview such as body gestures, engagement and concentration level, and how hesitant or effusive they were. The Behavioral Ethics Research Boards at the University of British Columbia, Canada and the Aga Khan University, Pakistan approved this research.

TABLE 1 Demographic description of selected schools and sample.

School ID	Geographic location	School system	Karachi sub-district (neighborhood)	Socioeconomic status of the neighborhood ^a †	Population density (residents per km ²)†
1	Rural	Government	Gadap	Low income PKR 1665	200
2	Urban	Private	Malir	Middle income PKR 12,000	35,140
3	Urban	Private	Jamshed	High income PKR 22,800	48,567

Note: † Shams, Z. I., Shahid, M., Nadeem, Z., et al. (2020).

^aGiven the unavailability of data on residents' income by town in Karachi, we used the proxy estimates of land prices in PKR per square yard using Federal Board of Revenue (FBR) valuation tables 2019 and 2021. Note that these estimates may vary from actual market prices of residential properties in Karachi based on land condition, amenities and demand of the property.

Analysis

The digital recordings of the FGDs were transcribed verbatim using English transliteration and imported into NVivo 12 software (QSR International Pty Ltd, Melbourne, Australia). Data were then subjected to a conventional content analysis approach to understand the OST use pattern as reported by participants in the study (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Analyses were conducted in six phases, following the methodology outlined by Hsieh and Shannon (2005): familiarization with the data, identifying keywords and generating preliminary codes, coding the transcripts and revising codes, organizing codes into subcategories and categories, revising and finalizing categories, and final reporting. In phase one, research team members (SK, MI, and UH) repeatedly reviewed the data to get a sense of key ideas. In the second phase, an inductive approach was used to develop an initial list of codes in English by identifying the recurring keywords. The three team members coded an initial four FGDs in parallel during which the code list was refined and updated iteratively through discussion. After coding 25% of the interviews in parallel and reaching 97% agreement on coding, in phase three, the remaining FGDs were coded by one research team member (MI).

In phase four, subcategories and categories were constructed based on similar meanings from the coded data through text retrieval and mutual discussion. Next, contextual interpretation of each category and subcategory was developed. The codes and categories that emerged were re-evaluated continuously within the team through weekly discussions during the analysis and interpretation phase. Phases five and six involved further discussion between researchers resulting in consensus on revisions to arrive at final categories. Coding frequencies were then computed to compare and contrast subcategories and categories across gender (boys vs. girls), school's geographic location (urban vs. rural contexts), and grades (sixth, seventh, and eighth). Examining variation by gender and location aided the interpretation. Children's direct quotations for each category were identified from the transcripts for reporting. We did not perform a line-by-line translation of the transliterated transcripts. Since all members were fluent in English and Urdu, the narrative underlying the final selected categories was translated for the reporting purposes. Although an inductive approach was used, researchers' backgrounds knowledge of child wellbeing and lived experiences in Pakistan may have influenced the development of the codes and categories and the interpretation of their interrelations.

RESULTS

We constructed eight distinct categories from nineteen codes that captured how youth participants spend their time after school on weekdays in Karachi, Pakistan. The categories, in order of frequency, were: (1) *religious activities*, (2)

schoolwork, (3) *screentime*, (4) *helping adult family members*, (5) *family time*, (6) *outdoor play*, (7) *indoor leisure activities*, and (8) *hanging out with friends*. Each category was developed from two to three related codes. Table 2 lists the related activity codes for each theme. Figure 1 shows to what extent codes differed by gender and participants' geographic location. Figure 2 provides a comparison of the codes across grade levels.

Religious activities

Partaking in religious activities after school emerged as having central importance in the lives of Pakistani youth. It was the most commonly and consistently described OST activity regardless of grade, gender, or locality. The most frequently mentioned religious activity was praying (at the mosque or home), followed by going to *madrassahs* (religious schools for learning principles of faith and the Quran), and reciting the Quran at home. While more boys mentioned going to Madrasah during afterschool hours, more girls reported reading the Quran at home on their own or under the guidance of a tutor. Praying was described as a social and group-based activity by boys, who went to the mosque with family, siblings, or friends, while girls reported praying alone at home. Youth spoke about their participation in religious activities with pride and described it as an expectation and norm for youth in their communities.

There were notable differences in religious participation based on geographic location. Youth who attended a rural school were more likely to spend most of their OST in religious activities. For example, a Grade 7 boy who attended a rural school noted: "I come home after praying, and then a little later the Madrasa teacher comes to my house to teach me. After that, I [go to] pray *Asar* prayers,¹ and then come home again." A grade 8 boy from the same school conveyed that his days were so filled with religious activities, such as praying and learning the Quran, he only slept a few hours per night, waking again at 6:00 a.m. to pray again. However, he added that this rigorous schedule did not leave him sleepy during the day. Similarly, a grade 7 girl from a rural school could only think of religious activities as examples of what she did after school. She emphasized: "In the afternoon...I just say *namaz*² and read the Quran...the days are so short that I don't know how they pass other than that." Religious activities featured prominently in participants' afterschool hours and comprised most of their OST use, especially in rural areas.

Schoolwork

Schoolwork, including take-home assignments and exam preparation, emerged as the second most frequently reported

¹Asar' refers to one of the five daily prayers Muslims are supposed to participate in daily.

²Namaz' is a Persian term for prayer.

TABLE 2 List of themes and codes for out-of-school activities of children in Pakistan.

Themes	Activity codes	Example quotes
Religious activities	Going to madrassah or religious education classes	Urban, Grade 7, boy: As soon as school is over, reach home by 2 o'clock, change clothes, eat, go to Madrasa, and come from Madrasa by 04:00 or 04:30. Rural, Grade 7, boy: I come home after praying, and then a little later the Madrassa teacher comes to my house to teach me. After that, I go for <i>Asar</i> prayers and then come home again...
	Reciting Quran	Rural, Grade 8, boy: When it is Maghrib time (sunset), we go for prayer, come from prayer, recite the Quran at home, eat bread and then attend the call for Isha's prayer... Rural, Grade 7, girl: In the afternoon...I just say <i>namaz</i> and read the Quran... the days are so short that I don't know how they pass other than that
Schoolwork	Going to tuition ^a	Urban, Grade 6, boy: I come home then I go to my tuition I come from my tuition at 8:30. Urban, Grade 7, girl: If you don't go to tuition, then you skip studying sometimes and then too much work piles up. But if you go to tuition, you study according to their set timings [so you can keep up].
	Doing homework at home	Urban school, Grade 7, boy: My mother doesn't let me play, she says, I have to come home from school and do homework—spend 2–3 h, and then I can go to play when the work is done, otherwise I have to keep working... there is no time. Rural, Grade 7, girl: ...Working in the kitchen, studying, studying, studying, studying.
Screen time	Watching T.V.	Urban, Grade 6 girl: After I get back home from school, I watch TV... Sometimes I use a mobile [phone], and sometimes I do my work. Then I say maghrib prayers... Urban, Grade 8, girl: In the evening, I sit with my mother, and if there is electricity, then we watch TV.
	Using cell phone	Urban, Grade 8, boy: After having dinner around 8–9, I use mobile phone for a while and then go to sleep... 10–11 is free time and then I sleep. Urban, Grade 6, girl: I don't even get time to eat (lunch) at that time... I get a lot of schoolwork... Because my tutor comes till 3. I study till 4:30, I do schoolwork. After that, I have free time till 6. So, I use [mobile] phone... Because I am not allowed to go outside, I talk to my friends...
Helping adult family member	Taking care of younger sibling	Urban, Grade 7, girl: I have a younger brother... he is (usually) asleep when I come back from school, so I look after him, and give him something to eat ... then when he wakes up, my younger sister takes him outside... Rural, Grade 6, girl: I wake up early... my mother wakes me up, while my [younger] brother is sleeping, so I sit with him because my mother is outside [making breakfast]... If my brother wakes up, he will cry and wake everyone else up, so my mother tells me to wake up early and soothe my brother if he wakes up and cries, and bring him outside... I am usually always watching my brother... he is with me while I do my homework... I also play with him... all day.
	Work to help in domestic chores	Urban, Grade 6, girl: When my mother is cooking, I am sitting by her studying, and I help her when she needs...any work she gives me, like filling up a pot of water, washing dishes... Rural, Grade 8, boy: After I come back home from school, I change my clothes and refresh myself and have lunch... After that I attend madrassah and say my prayers... then I come home and feed goats ...
	Helping family outside home	Urban, Grade 8, boy: After leaving school here, I take rest for an hour, then after that, I leave home for shop, I go there [for] my brother there for half an hour, then there is the time of tuition... Rural grade 7, boy: After school, I often visit my father at his shop and spend time there...
Family time	Watching T.V./sitting together with family/Meal with family	Urban, Grade 6, girl: Usually after our dinner by ten, all family members sit together. Rural, Grade 8, girl: whatever time is left towards the end of the day we do dinner and watch T.V.
	Visiting relatives/spending time with cousins	Urban, Grade 6, girl: My [maternal] grandfather lives very close by, so all of us siblings go there to spend time with him (in evening) because my grandmother has died, and my grandfather is alone, so we should spend some time with him. He tells us great stories. Rural Grade 7, girl: We just go to my aunt's house, just like that [for no reason]. I sit with my cousins there. I also go to my [maternal] grandmother's house and play with my cousins.

(Continues)

TABLE 2 (Continued)

Themes	Activity codes	Example quotes
Outdoor play	Outdoor play	Urban Grade 8 girl: [Me and my cousins] play on the roof... we play cricket and football, and we go cycling within our community... we live in a community with boundaries where there are also guards present. Urban Grade 7 boy: In the afternoon, after my nap and completing my schoolwork, I go out to play with my friends, and I usually stay out until 9 o'clock at night.
	Sports	Rural, Grade 7 boy: After having spent time on my phone, I go out around 4 pm to play football... Urban, Grade 8 boy: My parents take me for sports lessons including for cricket, football and basketball 3 days a week.
Indoor leisure	Engaging in creative pursuits and indoor play	Urban Grade 6, girl: Us sisters play together... like cooking games... my younger sister has a kitchen set and likes pretending to cook, so I play with her. We're not going to play boys' games, right? Urban Grade 7 girl: Often I take short nap and then when I (wake up and) have time I watch YouTube videos and do arts and crafts
	Rest or afternoon nap	Urban, Grade 8, boy: After leaving school here, I take rest for an hour, then after that, I leave home for shop, I go there [for] my brother there for half an hour, then there is the time of tuition... Urban, Grade 7 boy: In the afternoon, after my nap and completing my schoolwork, I go out to play with my friends, and I usually stay out until 9 o'clock at night.
Hanging out with friends	Going for walk/Spending time with friends	Urban, Grade 8, girl: My friends and I live in the same building, so sometimes they come to my house, and sometimes I go to their house... Urban, Grade 7, boy: After maghrib's prayers, I usually spend time with my friends (outside home).
	Going to local café for tea	Rural, Grade 7, boy: We go to local cafe'. Sit there for a while and then come back home in evening. Rural, Grade 7, boy: I spend most of my time outside with my friends...I [just] roam around, then after my prayer, I come back and roam in the gardens or sit in a local cafe.

^aTuition' refers to homework and schoolwork supervised by a tutor/mentor in an organized setting.

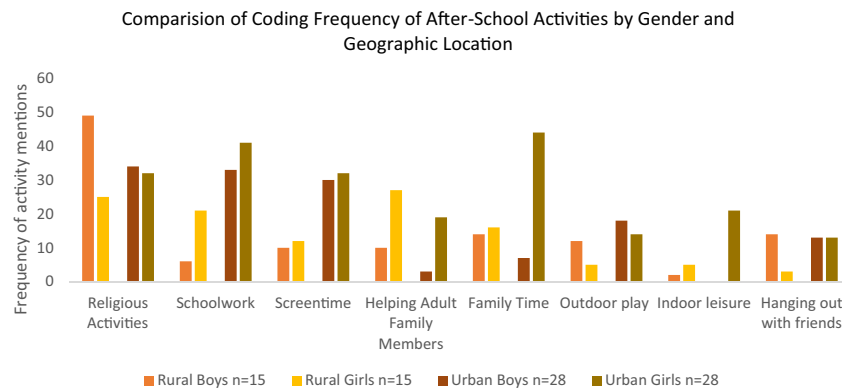


FIGURE 1 Coding frequency comparison of out of school time activities by gender and geographic location.

afterschool activity and was reported consistently across all grade levels. However, the frequency of youth who reported utilizing their OST for schoolwork was higher in urban contexts compared to rural contexts. Students either completed schoolwork on their own or participated in private tuition³ classes—a formal group setting outside school led by a tutor. Tuition was consistently perceived as an important way to keep up with schoolwork during OST as noted by a grade 7 girl: “If you don’t go to tuition, then you skip studying

sometimes and then too much work piles up. But if you go to tuition, you study according to their set timings [so you can keep up].” A few urban participants mentioned not taking tuition classes because they had an older sibling or a stay-at-home parent who helped them with their studies. Urban boys reported particularly extensive participation in tuition groups, ranging from 1 to 3 h every day. One urban grade 7 boy said, “...We don’t have any time. Most of the time at home we are studying ...” Even though tuition was perceived as a normative activity in urban areas, many students also expressed frustration about the amount of time taken up by schoolwork.

³“Tuition’ refers to homework and schoolwork supervised by a tutor/mentor in an organized setting.

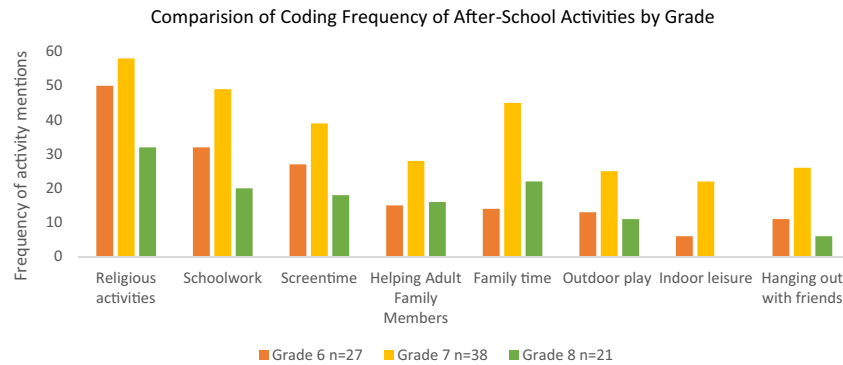


FIGURE 2 Coding frequency comparison of out of school time activities by grade.

Girls reported engaging in schoolwork for a larger portion of their OST compared to boys. Overall, girls put more emphasis on academic achievement as an important personal goal and they seemed more motivated to invest additional time to excel academically. This gender difference was similar for youth in rural and urban areas. A grade 8 girl from the rural school described her activities as “working in the kitchen, studying, studying, studying, studying.” Likewise, another Grade 7 girl from the rural school reported using her spare time to do schoolwork. A Grade 8 urban girl described, “If I’m not able to complete my homework at tuition, then I come home and complete it before I go to sleep.” Similarly, a Grade 7 urban girl said, “After I complete my schoolwork, then if there is an academic activity like a spelling competition, then I [can] study for that, or else I mostly just do extra learning like English or learning new vocabulary.” These accounts of using OST for schoolwork reflected the value of academic pursuits in the lives of children, especially girls, in Pakistan.

Screentime

The use of mobile phones or watching television emerged as the primary screen-based activity among participants consuming a significant portion of their daily OST. Screen time was described in similar ways across different grade levels. Urban youth engaged in screen-based activities more frequently than their rural counterparts. Although there were no apparent gender differences in the frequency with which youth cited screen-related activities in their daily routine, the reasons and access varied by gender. Boys were more likely to use their own or family members' phones to watch videos, play video games, and use social media, while girls were more likely to watch T.V. or YouTube videos on a borrowed device.

Boys in urban and rural contexts overall prioritized playing video games like PlayerUnknown's Battlegrounds (PubG) and using social media to interact with friends. Some boys recounted spending excessive hours playing video games, as described by one grade 6 boy from an urban school: “[A]fter...my family goes to sleep, for about three to four hours I play PubG, and then at five or six in the morning I wake up and start playing again.” Boys

generally boasted about the number of hours spent on their phones. Girls in urban schools emphasized their efforts to get permission to use their parents' phones and described watching videos and crafting tutorials with enthusiasm. For example, one grade 7 girl from an urban school noted, “I have to plead with her... ‘Mummy, please give me the mobile, give it to me’...first you have to plead, right? Then, my mother gives me the phone, and I use it for an hour or two.” In contrast to urban girls, none of the girls in rural areas reported using mobile phones for screen-related activities. Instead, they indicated that they spent their discretionary time watching television with their family. As an example, one grade 8 girl from a rural school noted, “whatever time is left towards the end of the day we do dinner and watch T.V.” Watching television for entertainment (cartoons or Pakistani dramas series) by themselves or with family was also reported by some urban girls. It was notable that urban girls mentioned screen time as a way to spend free time because they were not permitted to leave home and spend time outside in the neighborhood. As one Grade 7 urban girl described: “After tuition, I have some free time until six o'clock...I use a mobile phone then... because I'm not allowed to go outside...So I use a phone or laptop to watch videos or talk to my friends.” Taken together, these accounts shed light on gender-specific screen use patterns and rural–urban differences in OST routines among youth in Karachi, Pakistan, which align with overall patterns of mobile phone use in Pakistan and other LMICs, a topic addressed in the discussion section.

Helping adult family members

Children and youth's afterschool activities often included (unpaid) work inside or outside the home to support adults in the family. The type of work varied by gender, with girls indicating involvement in indoor and home-based work (e.g., helping in the household), while boys helped with chores outside the home (e.g., grazing livestock or manning a shop). Girls described engaging routinely in cooking, cleaning, and watching younger siblings as “helping mama.” Youth in higher grades reported such activities more frequently than those in lower grades.

Work-related activities were often incorporated into other OST activity routines. For example, one grade 6 girl reflected, “When my mother is cooking, I am sitting by her studying, and I help her when she needs...any work she gives me, like filling up a pot of water, washing dishes...” Several girls also noted occupying a near-constant caregiver role for their younger siblings. Typical caregiving activities included playing games, feeding, dressing, tutoring, and helping with schoolwork. A rural grade 6 girl described a typical morning:

Then also in the mornings... I wake up early, my mother wakes up, and she wakes me up, and my [younger] brother is sleeping, and I sit with him because my mother is outside [making breakfast], and my brother will wake up, cry and wake everyone else up, so my mother tells me to wake up early and soothe my brother if he wakes up and cries, and bring him outside... I am usually always watching my brother... he is with me while I do my homework... I also play with him... all day.

House-related work elicited strong feelings among some girls, as evident in one urban Grade 7 girl's comments:

I don't really like playing with little kids, but still, I do have to play with them a little bit... like, last night my cousins came over to play, and then when they go, I have to clean up after them and clean the whole room before I go to sleep.

Girls in both urban and rural contexts reported engaging in household activities to support the adults, but those in rural areas felt a stronger sense of obligation to do so to ease their mothers' burden. For boys, work-related activities often entailed working outside the home, such as helping their father at work or caring for livestock. An urban grade 8 boy described his routine:

After leaving school here, I take rest for an hour, then after that, I leave home for shop, I go there [for] my brother there for half an hour, then there is the time of tuition... one hour after tuition is the time of the madrassah... then after that, around 8 or 9 p.m., I use mobile phone for a short time, then I go to sleep.

Similarly, a grade 8 boy from a rural school described his routine as follows: “After I come back home from school, I change my clothes and refresh myself and have lunch... After that I attend madrassah and say my prayers... then I come home and feed goats ...” Girls and boys from rural contexts did not view these tasks as imposed labour or a burden. Instead, they expressed contentment around this routine work—an expected norm in the culture. In contrast, the accounts of urban boys seldom included any mention of indoor or outdoor work.

Family time

Regardless of the grade level, nearly all participants mentioned spending time with their families. Family time often took place towards the end of the day, in the late evening or at night, when everyone (especially when fathers or male elders) sat together for meals or watched television. There were no substantial differences in how this activity was pursued in urban versus rural contexts; however, this theme was most salient for girls. Girls—specifically those in urban areas—were far more likely than boys to mention spending intentional time with nuclear or extended family, including adults. One girl in Grade 6 in an urban school said:

My [maternal] grandfather lives very close by, so all of us siblings go there to spend time with him because my grandmother has died, and my grandfather is alone, so we should spend some time with him. He tells us great stories.

Similarly, a Grade 7 girl from a rural school described: “We just go to my aunt's house, just like that [for no reason]. I sit with my cousins there. I also go to my [maternal] grandmother's house and play with my cousins.” Girls mentioned spending more time with their mothers, siblings, and cousins than with friends in their local community, regardless of whether they lived in rural or urban areas. Many girls considered their female cousins their closest friends and spent significant amounts of time with them.

Boys mentioned family time less often as an intentional activity, but time with family was apparent in the context of engaging in other activities, such as participating in prayers and helping with chores. A grade 6 boy from a rural school said, “After I have done my dinner, I offer (maghrib) prayers, then I sit with my grandmother, sometimes massage her feet and then go to sleep.” A grade 6 boy from an urban school described: “After I come home from tuition, I spend time with my family for 20 to 30 minutes, and then at 5:30, I go to offer prayers with my grandfather.” Another grade 8 boy from an urban school said, “In the evening, I sit with my mother, and if there is electricity, then we watch T.V.” These narratives describe the centrality of family in the lives of Pakistani youth and how family time blends into OST.

Outdoor play

Boys in both rural and urban areas commonly mentioned outdoor play as an OST activity. An urban sixth-grade boy described: “In the afternoon, after my nap and completing my schoolwork, I go out to play with my friends, and I usually stay out until 9 o'clock at night.” Across all grade levels, boys mentioned playing informal sports such as cricket or football with friends, siblings, or cousins in neighborhood streets or available grounds. Only a few urban boys from more affluent families mentioned participating in organized team sports because they had access to sports clubs and

formal coaching. For the rest of the urban children, outdoor play was largely dependent on the neighborhood context and parents' choices. Taking into account safety, infrastructure, and supervision, these choices could either facilitate or deter children from playing outside. On the other hand, the enthusiasm and the excitement with which boys spoke about sports were notable in their tone and the non-verbal expressions such as excited nodding when a grade 7 boy enthusiastically reported he loves to play cricket.

Girls across all grade levels were far less likely than boys to report time outside their homes after school hours. Girls indicated that this was more due to safety constraints than a lack of desire. A few girls noted that they could play outside in the presence of a family member or within the vicinity of a gated community that was considered safe. A grade 6 girl from an urban school explained: "We used to go play outside, but not now because the environment is such... we don't get permission. If our cousins come over, we will go play on the roof." Given opportunity and space where they could be watched over (such as a compound between apartment buildings or the flat rooftop space atop their homes), girls described playing games like tag, hide and seek, catch, badminton, and "bat-ball" (cricket without the running). A grade 8 girl from an urban school described: "[My cousins and I] play on the roof... we play cricket and football, and we go cycling within our community... we live in a community with boundaries where there are also guards present." Of note, rural girls rarely mentioned outdoor play in their daily routine. This reflects the variation in opportunities and resources that shape outdoor play time during OST hours in Pakistan.

Indoor leisure activities

In contrast to the outdoor play space, which was largely occupied by boys, girls consistently mentioned indoor leisure activities during their OST. These included, among others, board games, imaginative play, crocheting, making arts and crafts, reading, writing, and resting or napping. Girls in urban contexts mentioned creative pursuits and reading for pleasure more often than girls in rural contexts. A Grade 7 girl from an urban school commented, "Us sisters play together... like cooking games... my younger sister has a kitchen set and likes pretending to cook, so I play with her. We're not going to play boy's games, right? Like cricket or tennis..." It is worth noting that boys did not mention engaging in any sort of indoor leisure activity, unlike girls. Both girls and boys in urban areas, however, expressed the need for rest or taking a nap at home, which was not mentioned by rural youth who were more likely to center their narratives around the need to do something.

Hanging out with friends

The least common but still distinct category of OST use was socializing or hanging out with friends after school.

The themes in this category interacted with other themes (e.g., hanging out with friends outdoors or socializing online). Time with friends was more often reported by older than younger participants and more commonly by boys than girls. Boys enjoyed using outdoor spaces for socializing with friends, while girls typically preferred to socialize indoors if and when they did spend time with friends. Also, the time used for socializing with friends usually occurred after religious activities, schoolwork, or other work and chores in the later afternoon or evening.

Boys mentioned roaming around the neighborhood with friends, strolling in nearby grounds, playing outdoor games, and sitting in teashops to chat. Some of these activities extended into the late evening for boys. For example, a grade 7 boy from a rural school described, "I spend most of my time outside with my friends...I [just] roam around, then after I pray, I come back and roam in the gardens or sit in a restaurant." A grade 7 boy from an urban context reported that after tuition class, "I just go outside to roam around with my friends in the park until 9 p.m." There were few differences in how urban and rural boys spent time with their friends.

Only two rural girls and five urban girls distinctly mentioned socializing with friends after school. Urban girls' experiences often comprised spending time with cousins close in age or neighbors with whom they had grown up within the boundaries of their home. Very few urban girls who lived in secure localities were able to actually 'hang out' with their friends within the limits of gated communities. A Grade 8 girl from an urban school offered this account of how she spends time with friends: "My friends and I live in the same building, so sometimes they come to my house, and sometimes I go to their house..." For other urban girls who experienced safety concerns but had access to technology, afterschool socializing was increasingly replaced by screen time, as described by a grade 6 girl from an urban school: "I have some free time [after tuition] until 6 o'clock, and I use a mobile phone... because I'm not allowed to go outside, so I use a phone or laptop to talk to my friends."

DISCUSSION

This study engaged children and youth from public and private schools in Karachi, Pakistan, to explore their OST activities. Research on OST conducted *with* youth rather than *on* youth is important as it yields more accurate and relevant insights into the daily lives of youth to inform contextually and culturally appropriate programs (Jabeen, 2009). Through analysis of qualitative data generated from sixteen focus groups with children and youth attending grades six to eight in three schools in Karachi, Pakistan, we identified eight categories that capture youth's OST use: (1) religious activities, (2) schoolwork, (3) screentime, (4) helping adult family members, (5) family time, (6) outdoor play, (7) indoor leisure activities, and (8) hanging out with friends. Consistent with activities identified in other contexts, such as North America, Europe, and East Asia (Bartko & Eccles, 2003;

Gracia et al., 2020; Hu & Mu, 2020; Lloyd et al., 2008; Sharp et al., 2015) these categories reflect youth participation in both structured and unstructured extracurricular activities. An interesting pattern which emerged in all these categories was that the types of activities in which youth engaged and the frequency of participation varied by gender and was influenced by rural versus urban locality.

Religious participation and educational activities

The most prominent OST activities identified were those related to faith, such as praying several times a day and reading and studying the Quran independently and in organized group classes. The high level of involvement in religious activities reflects the central role of religion in the lives of Pakistani youth. In Pakistan, religion is considered an integral part of public and social life, unlike in secular countries where it is considered a personal matter (Zaman et al., 2006). It is important to note that the laws, societal norms, and family practices in Pakistan are shaped by the teachings and principles of Islam and are integrated into youth's learning and experiences in- and outside of school settings (Ahmed & Zaman, 2019; Zaman et al., 2006). Pakistan is a homogenous society in terms of religion, where 96% of the population is Muslim (Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, 1998), and religious participation is seen as a duty that all Muslims must fulfill.

Participation in religious activities differed among subgroups of youth in our study. Specifically, we found that boys commonly reported participating in group-based religious activities in their community, while girls tended to practice their faith at home on their own or with a tutor. This gender difference has roots in the religious traditions in Pakistan, where praying is a social activity for boys; they are expected to attend communal prayers at the mosque together with other men. Girls are excluded from these male spaces based on the belief that there may be sexual/romantic tension; instead, they are supposed to fulfill their religious duties on an individual basis (Vandello, 2016; Woodlock, 2010). Scholars argue that these traditions, based on the patriarchal interpretation of Islam (Woodlock, 2010), have created a gender gap in opportunities. It prevents young girls from participating in community-building activities, which are considered an important asset for developing social capital and taking leadership in the wider community setting. Providing these opportunities to girls in a culturally appropriate way is an important area of PYD in Pakistan. Overall, youth perceived religious participation as an important and meaningful activity and a central part of their daily routines. Religious activities thus offer a context for culturally relevant ways of promoting PYD in Pakistan. This is consistent with research and theory emphasizing that participating in a religious community is an external asset for PYD (Scales et al., 2016).

Next to religious activities, we found that educational activities comprised a dominant part of youth's OST. Educational activities were organized (e.g., group classes

led by a tutor), or youth completed them independently in their own time (e.g., studying and completing schoolwork at home). Girls, in particular, emphasized spending extensive time on schoolwork. A possible explanation for this finding is that academic achievement offers opportunities for future employment and is perceived as a critical step towards financial independence for girls and women in Pakistan who have an overall lower social status in society compared to men (Lloyd & Grant, 2005). In fact, girls with minimal formal education tend to assume the work burdens of adults prematurely and are forced into early marriages and continue to work in low-status occupations (Lloyd & Grant, 2005). The emphasis on academic pursuits by Pakistani youth overall reflects the value placed on education given the socioeconomic context of Pakistan. This is consistent with the developmental asset patterns found in other Asian and African countries (Alhassan et al., 2017; Amin & Chandrasekhar, 2012; Chen & Lu, 2009; Savahl et al., 2020), where a strong commitment to learning and achievement motivation was considered an (internal) asset for PYD (Scales et al., 2016). Positive educational attitudes are particularly important for youth in developing countries, as education has been shown to be one of the most effective ways to achieve intergenerational social mobility and to live a productive life (Larson & Verma, 1999).

Our finding that youth reported spending significant time in structured activities, such as organized religious and educational activities, is consistent with extant research. Structured activities are a valuable part of PYD; they provide stability, consistency, and opportunities for constructive use of time while offering adult supervision and mentoring for children and youth (Eccles et al., 2003; Larson, 2001). However, while countries in Europe and North America tend to offer a wide range of structured activities such as sports, art and music classes, leadership programs, and extracurricular school clubs (Rees, 2017; Zuzanek, 2005), in Pakistan, the scope of structured activities is limited to religious and educational pursuits. Expanding and diversifying the structured activities that are offered to support PYD more holistically and in a culturally meaningful way in Pakistan is an area for future development.

Leisure activities

Screen time was the most reported leisure activity for participants in our study, followed by outdoor playtime with friends (reported mainly by boys) and indoor playtime with cousins and friends (reported predominantly by girls). The finding that screen-based activities were the dominant leisure activities during youth's OST hours is consistent with research from other parts of the world (Gracia et al., 2020; Hu & Mu, 2020). Aligned with previous research, boys tended to play video games online, whereas girls tended to socialize with friends (e.g., chatting, social media) (Ahn & Yoo, 2022; Olds et al., 2009; Zuzanek, 2005). We found a culturally specific gender difference, with boys being more

likely to own their phones or have a regular access to a hand-held device than girls. Girls were less likely to own or have regular smartphone access and spent more time watching television. The gender difference in owning and accessing smartphones is consistent with how resources are distributed between male and female children within families in Pakistan.

Research has shown that sons are often prioritized over daughters when allocating family resources, including smartphones (Faizunnisa & Ikram, 2006; Hamid & Ahmed, 2011). A cross-national study comparing phone use and access in South Asian and Southeast Asian countries found that Pakistan had the highest gender divide, with mobile phones and public access communication modes primarily used by males, while women relied on fixed phones within the household or other people's phones (Zainudeen et al., 2010). Evidence also indicated that the gender gap in using technological devices is rooted in conservatism linked to patriarchy, such as beliefs that using such devices may compromise girls' safety (e.g., social contacts that are not approved by parents) and purity (e.g., access to content that may not be consistent with cultural norms and beliefs) (Hamid & Ahmed, 2011; Jamil, 2021). However, technology access can be an avenue for capacity building for marginalized youth (Christie & Lauzon, 2014; Kam et al., 2009). For example, it can be used as a means to provide youth with the knowledge and skills that can help them connect with the wider world (Christie & Lauzon, 2014; Kam et al., 2009). Hence, creating culturally appropriate opportunities for all youth in Pakistan to interact with technology represents an opportunity for their positive development.

Another notable finding in our study was that boys but not girls reported playing outdoors with friends or alone during their OST. Girls noted restrictions to leaving their houses to support their safety. In the few instances where girls described outdoor play, it took place within set physical boundaries (e.g., the house's flat roof or within the bounds of a guarded and gated housing community). This finding is consistent with previous research on OST use in less economically prosperous countries showing gender differences in leisure with boys having more time for outdoor activities, and girls staying indoors and dedicating more time to school- and housework (Amin & Chandrasekhar, 2012; Hu & Mu, 2020; Lloyd et al., 2008). Keeping children and youth safe is a serious concern in Pakistan. Various studies have shown that children and youth in Pakistan may be vulnerable to harassment, crime, abduction, and safety issues when they move freely in their communities (Jabeen, 2009, 2014). The relatively high occurrence of safety incidents outside the home affects youth, especially adolescent girls, and prevents them from moving freely (Jabeen, 2014; Qutub et al., 2015). Furthermore, concerns about sexual harassment and assault against young girls and women in public spaces are widespread and receive the most media coverage among all child protection issues in Pakistan (Jabeen, 2014). Hence, while boys are commonly permitted to socialize in a public sphere from an early age (Ahmed & Zaman, 2019;

Mughal, 2021), adolescent girls are often relegated to the private sphere where they can be better protected. A recent study from Pakistan which recorded children's discussions of their safety and agency corroborated our findings (Ahmed et al., 2022). While these concerns are well-founded, research has demonstrated clear benefits of free and unstructured outdoor play for children and youth including physical activity, self-confidence, problem-solving, satisfaction with life, and community connectedness (Brussoni et al., 2012). Creating safe spaces and finding culturally appropriate ways for all youth to play outdoors in communities is therefore an important area of development to support PYD in Pakistan (Abro et al., 2015; Qutub et al., 2015).

Family time and work at home

We found that youth in the present study spent extensive time with their families in the form of family meals or in the context of helping with work. Girls tended to help their family members by taking care of siblings and taking significant responsibility for chores in the household. Boys tended to help with work outside their homes, such as taking care of livestock (in rural areas) or helping at the family store (in urban areas). Moreover, boys in our study tended to work with their fathers and male relatives, whereas girls tended to assist their mothers and female relatives. This finding is consistent with research from LMICs that showed traditional gender socialization patterns including boys and girls spending more time with adults of the same gender throughout their adolescent years to learn from them and be socialized into culturally appropriate gender roles (Larson & Verma, 1999; Lloyd et al., 2008). Further, participation in work was the only theme for which age differences were noted, with older girls holding more housework-related responsibilities than younger girls. Of note, work responsibilities were more often mentioned by rural than urban participants, reflecting a resource gap for alternative activities (e.g., academic or tuition classes, and organized sports) which tend to be costly and occur in urban club settings which are non-existent in rural areas in Pakistan. Hence, opportunities for extracurricular and recreational programs during OST need to be addressed particularly for marginalized youth in rural contexts in Pakistan (Jabeen, 2009; Jamil, 2021; Mughal, 2021).

Work activities recorded in the study also had a social component and took place in interaction with family members thus offering an opportunity to socialize with the family (e.g., taking care of and playing with a sibling, helping a parent, helping a grandparent). But even outside the work context, family members were a primary social network for youth. This was true especially for girls who consistently reported that their cousins were their best friends. In the absence of social institutions and charitable, or community organizations that provide programs for youth, time spent with adults in family and community serves as a primary context for socialization and skill development as found in our study. Research has shown that strong, positive family connections

are an important asset for PYD (Scales et al., 2016), and this may be particularly evidenced in LMICs with a cultural orientation that emphasizes group harmony and interdependence (Ahn & Yoo, 2022; Gracia et al., 2020; Rees, 2017; Zuzanek, 2005). Therefore, supportive relationships with family members warrant consideration when understanding how PYD can be promoted among Pakistani youth.

Implications for practice

The study's implications for PYD within Pakistan's socio-cultural context extend beyond academia. They signal a need for collaboration among educators, practitioners, and community stakeholders to design interventions for marginalized youth, including girls, economically disadvantaged youth, and youth in rural areas. The synergy among community leaders and local authorities, including those from educational and religious spheres, is crucial for designing socioculturally responsive programs that foster PYD.

Gender-segregated social and prayer spaces offer a promising and culturally relevant venue to enhance community social capital, especially for young girls. These spaces provide secure environments for nurturing spiritual, moral, and social skills in youth. They can also function as platforms for offering essential life skills and counseling on topics such as marriage, mental health, reproductive health, and careers. This strategy has the potential to advance personal, spiritual, and vocational growth for youth in Pakistan. Future research may explore the lived experiences and perspectives of young girls on how such spaces could play a role in shaping their personal and social-emotional development.

Technology offers a promising avenue for building capacity among marginalized rural youth. Collaborations involving educational institutions, technology providers, and community organizations can help ensure stable internet connectivity to youth living in remote areas. This connectivity, in turn, can provide access to educational and learning resources, skill building tools, and virtual mentorship programs. The availability of online technological platforms holds the potential to reduce the digital divide and expand opportunities for youth success and thriving. The feasibility and effectiveness of such institutional partnership as well as technological programs, is an area which can be explored and informed by future scientific scholarship.

Findings from this research can also inform approaches to addressing gender disparities and empowering marginalized groups in Pakistan's education sector. For example, OST programs, including arts, sports, and skill-building, offered on school premises hold great potential to address the needs of these groups. Schools, as secure spaces with supervision and sports facilities, provide ready-made sites for recreational activities. Successful after-school initiatives in private schools can extend enrollment to disadvantaged youth through partnerships between educational institutions, community organizations, and local authorities.

Moreover, in the context of Pakistan's gender-segregated education system, schools are in a unique position to facilitate culturally appropriate PYD opportunities for girls. Future studies may conduct need assessments for such after school programming at the government, school and community level in the context of public and rural school system in Pakistan. Collectively, by leveraging cultural assets, educational opportunities, and technology-driven innovations, these strategies can cultivate holistic PYD in Pakistan and support a more inclusive and empowered generation.

Limitations

Several limitations need to be considered in this study. The coding of themes may have been affected by our pre-existing knowledge about OST and youth development, and several research members' lived experiences with growing up as females in Pakistan. Furthermore, selected activities could be coded into multiple categories because they contained meaning relevant to more than one OST concept. We did not gather data pertaining to the number of siblings and birth order as part of demographic questions, which is also theorized to affect the time use pattern of adolescents especially in societies where family values are highly emphasized and bonding with siblings is valued more than with friends. We used grade-level information as a proxy for age, which may have masked age-related developmental differences in OST activities. Most schools were located in Karachi and selected from the AKU-IED's partner school network. We included one available public rural school. A more balanced representation of schools from urban and rural contexts could have increased the applicability of the findings to a wider population in Pakistan. Finally, the study took place in a school setting, and children may have emphasized activities they perceived as desirable (e.g., schoolwork) over those they perceived to be undesirable.

CONCLUSION

This is one of the first studies that engaged youth in Pakistan in an exploration of their OST use. The findings generated from the study provide meaningful insights about youth's OST use in Pakistan. As in other contexts, emerging themes reflect a spectrum of structured and unstructured activities. Structured activities encompassed only two themes, religious activities and educational activities with a tutor, but these were the most frequently reported by participants. Themes reflecting unstructured activities were more varied and included screentime, helping adult family members, outdoor play, indoor leisure activities, hanging out with friends, and spending time with family. Taken together, the patterns of OST use in our study reflect the sociocultural and gender-specific patterns that need to be considered when developing and implementing OST activities and strategies to promote PYD among Pakistani youth.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

No author has any competing or conflict of interest to declare.

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