

Student Resistance to Neoliberal University Education in Pakistan

Muhammad Usman Chishti*

Department of Sociology, University of Management and Technology (UMT), Lahore, Pakistan; Ph.D.

Education Scholar, Superior University, Lahore, Pakistan

Email: Usman.chishti@umt.edu.pk

Abstract

University education in Pakistan is increasingly structured by neoliberal ideas that emphasize market efficiency, competition, and profitability. The present research explores how students experience and resist, often subtly, these dynamics within their academic environment. Based on a qualitative research design, this study relies on in - depth interviews with students at the University of Management and Technology (UMT) in Lahore. Students identified their academic experience as being heavily oriented toward grade maximization and commercial interests and often irrelevant to the social context of Pakistan. Yet, students were not passive; many students demonstrated quiet forms of resistance in everyday academic routines. These included joking about rote learning, criticizing exam - focused teaching, and choosing socially impactful career paths over high - paying corporate roles. Using an infrapolitics lens and the notion of hidden transcripts, the present study interprets such understated behaviors - sarcasm, emotional withdrawal, or grassroots initiatives - as meaningful acts of resistance. Findings of the study suggest that even within the neoliberal model of education, students exercise agency and struggle for a more socially conscious and humane model of higher education. These findings point toward the imperative of engaging with the voices of students and realigning academic practices with values and needs of the larger society.

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* Corresponding author.

1. Introduction

Over the last couple of decades, higher education in most parts of the world has been altered and framed under neoliberal ideologies. These ideologies outline education as a market commodity, while students are portrayed more in the perspective of consumers [1]. Today, institutions in competitive educational markets give priority to performance metrics consisting of graduate employability, enrollment figures, and international rankings instead of holistic intellectual development. Such efficiency biases this shift toward making graduates job-ready, most often at the cost of critical thinking, ethics, and social involvement. This neo-liberal orientation is increasingly visible in Pakistan, particularly within the precincts of private universities and their programs with a business and professional orientation. Policies about education and institutional strategies stress efficiency, international competitiveness, and relevance to the needs of the corporate sector. The value of education, therefore, is usually framed in terms of its economic return - what it can yield in a "knowledge - based economy" - other than its potential for civic responsibility or social consciousness [1].

1.1 Impact on Curricula and Stakeholders

There is concern among scholars regarding the ways in which neoliberal policies reshape curriculum and impact the experiences of different stakeholders in higher education. For example, teaching practices within fields such as accounting and finance are usually oriented towards market imperatives, leading to textbook-driven learning and exam-based evaluations as the primary means for creating technically capable workers for the corporate sector [2]. These often downplay social issues of larger relevance, ethical exploration, and local significance. While there is a growing body of literature that critiques neoliberal education, much research focuses on institutional dynamics or perspectives from academic staff. The student voice is still noticeably absent in most literature.

1.2 Research Gap

This gap is important because students are those most directly affected by these shifts. Their insights are crucial to understanding how neoliberalism is internalized, negotiated, or contested within academic environments. To the extent that research neglects student perspectives, there is a risk of overlooking an important dimension of how educational ideologies are experienced in everyday academic life.

1.3 Emerging Student Voices and Resistance

Recent research has only just started to consider how students respond to these institutional changes. The authors in [2], for instance, researched accounting students in Pakistan and found that most were aware of neoliberal undercurrents in their education. Far from passively accepting these values, some students were able to practice subtle forms of resistance by turning down lucrative corporate positions, questioning the over-emphasis on grades, or finding more satisfying career options that focused on society. These findings have questioned the dominant understanding of students as passive recipients in the educational system. Students interpret, critique, and at times subvert the dominant neoliberal narrative. Drawing upon this work, the present study examines one private university in Lahore to investigate the ways in which neoliberalism in their

education is resisted by and lived through the students. In placing the student perspective at the forefront, this research helps further develop the ways in which neoliberal ideologies are contested in the everyday academic lives of young people in Pakistan.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Neoliberalism in Higher Education: Neoliberalism is commonly understood as a collection of ideas and policies centered on free markets, privatization, and competition that are extended into public realms, such as education Reference [3,1]. In higher education, a neoliberal approach often takes the form that scholars describe as academic capitalism or marketization: universities operate like businesses, marketing their "product" (degrees) and treating students as paying customers [1]. On a global scale, this has been reflected in the commodification of education, cost-cutting and efficiency drives, the supremacy of metrics and rankings, and curricula oriented toward vocational skills in high market demand at the expense of liberal arts, critical inquiry, or local relevance Reference [1,4]. These developments are not immune to the higher education sector in Pakistan. Reforms and the proliferation of private institutions since the early 2000s have increasingly oriented universities towards the market. Business - oriented models in Pakistani universities have started viewing education as a commodity and students as "customers", driven in part by policies that promote the idea of a knowledge economy [1]. Higher Education Commission (HEC) and many institutions encourage entrepreneurship, STEM fields, and international standards, hoping to integrate Pakistan into global educational markets - often along Western benchmarks of quality. The improvement of technical quality and global comparability is considered important, yet these developments also raise concerns about social justice and cultural relevance in education [1]. For example, universities advertise job placement rates and salary prospects, but might pay less attention to producing civically engaged, socially conscious graduates [1].

2.1 Neoliberalism in Professional Education

Neoliberal philosophies are particularly evident in professional and management education, such as business, finance, and engineering, where the curriculum is conventionally geared towards the development of technical competence. The primary goal is the maximization of efficiency and profit. Accounting education, as an illustrative case, has been criticized for perpetuating a limited view of the accountant's role by preparing "human capital" for corporations while valuing shareholder interests over social concerns more generally [5,6]. Traditional accounting curriculums commonly emphasize international standards and practice (for example, IFRS, or International Financial Reporting Standards) based on the assumption that accounting is the same across the world [7]. The consequence can be that the educational context becomes invisible: students are taught using case studies from Western multinationals like Apple and Microsoft, while local conditions and ethical concerns like corruption and inequality are simply skimmed over [8,9]. Indeed, a number of earlier studies found that traditional accounting teachings embed "the primacy of the market" as an unquestionable good and present financial reporting as an objective, technical practice in service of investors [6].

Most importantly, these critiques point out a tension between vocational training vs. holistic education. The authors in [9], for example, describe how accounting programs can devolve into mere vocational training that

produces graduate skilled at technical tasks but incapable of critical thinking about the role of the profession in society [9,10]. Likewise, the authors in [10] note that when curricula are restricted to the preparation of reports and analysis for managers and investors, then students internalize a conventional, apolitical view of their discipline [10,7]. In the case of Pakistan, the authors in [7] observe that accounting development was historically based on international models that were subject to little local adaptation, entrenching a mindset that one size fits all. The risk is a technically sound education that is de-contextualized and "de-humanized," one that does not engage students with the human and social implications of their work.

2.2 Student Resistance and Perspectives

While faculty and curricula may advocate for neoliberal values, students are not passive vessels. Studies in critical education indicate that students commonly feel a disconnect in their education when profitability and competition are valued over learning and personal development [3]. They might outwardly comply-study hard to make good grades and find prestigious jobs-but inwardly question or resent aspects of this. The authors in [4] point out that resistance can take many forms, not all of them overt: it encompasses quiet, covert acts or even attitudes that run counter to the dominant norms without overt confrontation. Still, few studies have directly investigated how university students, in particular those in Pakistan, make sense of and respond to neoliberal educational practices. A hint may be drawn from the recent work of the authors in [11]: when provided with a voice through a critical pedagogy intervention, accounting students expressed dissatisfaction with rote learning and a desire for an education that is more socially relevant [11,6]. Similarly, the authors in [2] provide evidence that Pakistani students are aware of the neoliberal agenda in their education - pointing out for example a fierce competition for grades and a feeling of being treated as "customers" in a marketised university [2]. More importantly, they discovered that students are not passive: through humour, cynicism, and selective disengagement, students create a "hidden transcript" of critique that runs counter to the official script of compliance and enthusiasm [2].

2.3 Infrapolitics and Hidden Transcripts

This study draws on the theoretical framework of everyday resistance and hidden transcripts to interpret student behavior [6,13]. This framework explains how subordinated groups may resist domination in unobtrusive ways when open revolt is risky or impossible. It introduces the concept of infrapolitics - the realm of everyday resistance that falls short of outright defiance, including acts like foot - dragging, feigned ignorance, jokes, gossip, or covert sabotage. These acts are often so routine and understated that they may seem insignificant or go unnoticed by those in power, yet they carry a political intent: they let the disempowered assert dignity, critique authority, or carve out autonomous spaces without directly inviting repression [6,13]. A key point in this framework is the distinction between the public transcript and the hidden transcript [13]. The public transcript is the outward performance of compliance or conformity that subordinate individuals display in the presence of power, such as students politely nodding in class, taking exams, and following rules. The hidden transcript, by contrast, is the critique and dissent that these individuals share in offstage spaces, "behind the back of the dominant" [13]. Thus, peasants may sing mocking folk songs about landlords when alone, or workers may complain about management in the break room. These hidden transcripts are crucial because they represent a

clearer account of grievances and intentions than the public transcript reveals, and they incubate broader resistance by creating a shared understanding among the oppressed that the powerholders' ideology is not legitimate or inevitable.

Applying this framework to education, the public transcript would be students apparently acquiescing to the system: attending lectures, striving for grades, and saying what teachers want to hear in a university or classroom setting. The hidden transcript would come from places such as student-only discussions, anonymous feedback, or even interviews like those in our study, whereby students show frustration, mock their course work, or dream about alternative paths. By adopting the notion of *infrapolitics*, we treat students' actions, words, and feelings not as neutral or meaningless but as potentially resistant reactions against education's structures of power [13]. That which seems like apathy or humor at face value could actually be a quiet rebellion against the injustices of life in the neoliberal "rat race." This framework informs our analysis, attuning us to subtext in the narratives of students: tone, irony, or asides may betray a deeper critique of power [2]. Taken together, the following section outlines a theoretical framework for this study that synthesizes insights from the critical higher education literature and the theory of everyday resistance. It postulates that: a) neoliberal values are embedded in the university education system and are experienced - often negatively - by students; b) students can exercise agency in order to resist these impositions in small - scale ways; c) examining these phenomena through an *infrapolitical* lens can reveal a rich, otherwise hidden, landscape of student politics and identity - formation within the educational sphere.

3. Methodology

Design: We used a qualitative case study approach to explore student experiences within a single institution. The site selected for this research was the University of Management and Technology, Lahore, a high-ranking private university in Pakistan famous for its highly sought-after business, management, and technology programs. UMT has been an apt setting because it truly personifies the modern, market-oriented university ethos: it operates in an urban education market surrounded by competitors, and its curricula, at least in professions like accounting, business administration, and others, are clearly designed according to international standards and corporate sector expectations. This context made it possible for us to observe the actual manifestation of neoliberal educational values on the ground and the ways in which students negotiate them in their daily academic life.

3.1 Participants

The study focused on senior undergraduate students in business-related programs, such as Accounting, Finance, and Management, at UMT. We employed purposive sampling to select participants who had substantial exposure to the university's educational system, typically third- or fourth-year students (ages ~21-23 years). In total, we conducted 15 semi-structured interviews with students, of which 8 were women and 7 were men. Participants were drawn from different programs, such as accounting and BBA, among others, and included both high-achieving students and those students with more average academic records to ensure a diversity of viewpoints. Assuring anonymity, all participating students were promised that their names would not appear;

thus, pseudonyms or generic labels, such as Student 1, Student 2, etc., are used when reporting quotes.

3.2 Data Collection

Each interview took about 40 - 60 minutes. We used a semi - structured interview protocol with open - ended questions that focused on students' perceptions of their courses and curriculum, feelings about grading, exams and competition, career aspirations and values, and times when they felt disillusioned or took action because of or against their educational experiences. The interviewer approached this style as conversational, inviting the student to recall anecdotes and reflect upon their experiences. We also asked students to identify incidents or times when particular feelings - for example, being highly engaged or alienated by learning, discussing the education system with peers - During the interviews, we were attuned to indirect signals and feelings. Following the analytical cue that resistance can be elaborated in tone or humor [6,13], we observed whether students laughed ironically, used sarcasm, demurred, or showed excitement towards particular topics [2]. These observations were recorded in field notes directly after each interview. A few interviews were conducted online (via Zoom, because of a student's scheduling limitation), in which we asked participants to keep cameras on (with permission) so we could see non-verbal expressions [2]. All interviews were audio recorded with permission and transcribed verbatim. Transcriptions were then checked against recordings for accuracy.

3.3 Data Analysis

We used a thematic analysis method to identify patterns in the interview data, following the approach in [13]. Our analysis was both inductive-we allowed themes to emerge from the data-and deductive-guided by our theoretical interests in neoliberalism and resistance. Each author/ researcher first read the transcripts multiple times to become immersed in the data and noted initial codes. We then discussed and consolidated these codes, organizing them into larger themes that reflected our research questions, such as "Perceptions of Neoliberal Education", "Feelings of Alienation/Dehumanization", "Subtle Resistance Behaviors", "Alternative Aspirations". According to the approach in [14], we followed qualitative text analysis techniques to assure a systematic coding process [14]. The analysis was importantly informed by the infrapolitics framework [6,13]. This meant that when coding, we were not just attentive to what students said but how they said it. For instance, if a student described doing the minimum for an assignment with a smirk or described a classroom incident jokingly, we considered whether this could be a form of quiet resistance or commentary on the system rather than taking it at face value. We also considered the context of statements: a seemingly innocuous comment like "I will not follow that path" took on new meaning it said in response to peers urging the student to pursue a high - paying corporate job - it became an act of defiance [2]. Using theoretical triangulation in this way - combining inductive theme development with a theoretical lens - we aimed to enrich the interpretation of the data. I enhanced the trustworthiness of our analysis by engaging in peer debriefing and member checking. The research team discussed preliminary findings and theme interpretations, and we shared these with two external academics familiar with critical education research. Minor theme definition

adjustments were made for clarity. We shared a summary of findings with three participant students to determine if the interpretations resonated with participants, which helped to ensure we were not overlaying our own biases onto the data. All these steps enhanced the credibility and confirmability of the qualitative findings.

4. Findings

Our findings are organized according to the research objectives, starting with students' experiences of neoliberal education (Objective 1), followed by the forms of resistance students practice (Objective 2), and finally a theoretical interpretation of these resistances through infrapolitics (Objective 3, further elaborated in the Discussion). Quotes or paraphrased points attributed to different participants are indicated by pseudonyms (Student 1, Student 2, etc.).

4.1 Students' Experiences within a Neoliberal Educational Environment

The students at UMT Lahore provided very rich, personal stories of how they encounter a profit-driven, grade-centric, and Western-modeled curriculum in their daily academic lives. A clear thread was that they see their education as overly technical and impersonal, directed more toward churning out efficient workers rather than well-rounded human beings. Several interviewees used striking metaphors to describe this. "They just teach students to memorise... we have learnt the technicalities only," claimed one student in lamenting the rote-learning emphasis. "The other day I was telling my lecturer that this degree has turned me into a robot and we students don't even think we matter. Robots can equally apply formulas and carry out tasks," recalled Student 8 Reference [2]. This vivid remark summarizes a sense others shared: that the system is drilling them in repetitive, mechanical tasks -- as another student put it, "just a numbers game" -- at the expense of critical or creative thought. Similarly, Student 11 felt reduced to a tool, portraying themselves as "Microsoft Excel or a calculator where somebody can insert numbers", which they said was basically "what it means being an accountant" under the existing curriculum [2]. In these descriptions, one senses dehumanization. Students perceive their education as having neglected their personal growth, their creativity, and even their identity while molding them into narrow occupational roles.

Another related concern was the disconnection from local reality and issues: Students indicated that their courses seldom lead to the discussion of problems relevant to Pakistani society. "Society has not been addressed at all," Student 8 insisted, reflecting how social, ethical or environmental dimensions are largely missing from their accounting courses [2]. Instead, abstract concepts and examples stemming from developed countries take prominence; for example, giant US corporations are discussed in textbooks and case studies. "The books are giving us nothing... I see books having data from Apple and Microsoft but none of them is in Pakistan," noted Student 7 criticizing the foreign-centric curriculum [8,2]. Students found it ironic that while classes instruct on global standards like IFRS and promote multinational companies, they rarely discuss Pakistani industries and problems such as local business practices, corruption or inequality. This one-size-fits-all, Western-modelled education made some students feel alienated-their own context rendered invisible. Student 5 noted, "there are so many fake entries we do not study...This will get me two marks in the final exam, but nothing more." He

expressed frustration that real issues, like fraud or money laundering in Pakistan, were either reduced to mere technical points or ignored altogether [2,2]. Put bluntly, students conceive their education as "irrelevant to the reality outside campus", focused only on generating the "correct answers" for exams and reports, without a thought about the consequences those answers will have in the world beyond the classroom.

Another dominant feature of students' experience was the pressure to maximize grades and compete. Many characterized UMT's academic culture as a "rat race", where success is primarily measured by GPAs, class rankings, and landing a job at a big corporation. One student narrated an incident in an accounting class: the lecturer organized a friendly competition to see who could complete a balance sheet fastest-"the winner was whoever completed a balance sheet first. One student made it all correct in just 7 minutes and his balance sheet balanced. And they think that this is a success," the student recalled, with evident sarcasm [2]. The class cheered the speedy student, but our interviewee found this absurd: reducing learning to a timed exercise felt like a trivialization of education-"just formulae and speed, no understanding," as they put it. This story illustrates how deeply a grades-and-performance mindset has penetrated the student experience. The neoliberal ethos values outcomes-like a perfectly balanced sheet or high test score-over the process of learning or critical inquiry, and students are keenly aware of this. Some, like Student 18 who recounted the competition, react with humor and cynicism, feeling that the essence of education is lost when "balancing the balance sheet is considered the hallmark of success" [2].

In short, in relation to our first aim, the students illustrated their education in Pakistan -- at least as far as the business/accounting streams at UMT -- as resolutely instrumentalist: designed to create what one student identified as "number-crunching robots" rather than socially aware professionals. They described the experience of learning as formulaic, rigidly standardized, and alienating in both origin and intent. The inert practice of knowledge transmission is characteristic of top-down pedagogies, rote memorization of techniques and international templates, with little opportunity for questions or local contextualization. A critical, reflective tone of voice was common to many of the interviewees; it seems that they are clearly aware of these neoliberal characteristics and of their own alienation within this structure. Not least -- and most importantly -- they are not just passive cogs in the machine: they are aware of what has happened to them, often painfully so. As one participant expressed it, "Our educators are training and introducing new 'beasts of burden' into society -- individuals who reproduce what they are taught without asking questions" [2]. This stark judgement reveals that students do have a sense of the conditionings occurring -- to accept things given, to not question authority or status quo in the curriculum. They are reflecting critically on their everyday experience of a neoliberal model of education -- the first step, perhaps, in resistance to it.

4.2 Quiet Forms of Student Resistance in Everyday Campus Life

In our study, despite feeling shaped and constrained by a neoliberal educational system, these students were far from passive or blindly compliant. Instead, they deployed a range of subtle, less evident forms of resistance. These are generally not dramatic protests or confrontational forms of resistance with authorities but more everyday behaviors and choices through which students asserted their agency and resisted the dominant values of education in small ways. Using the terminology of infrapolitics, students engaged in quiet, strategic dissent

that often flies under the radar [6,13]. From our interviews, we identified several such forms of resistance, including the following:

Humor and Mockery of the System

Many students coped with their frustration by joking about courses, exams, and grades. This humor was often laced with critique. Consider again the anecdote of the balance sheet competition; the student's sarcastic remark - "and they think that this is a success!" - was a way to overtly mock the obsession with technical perfection and speed [2]. In the same vein, some reported joking with classmates about how certain assignments were "meaningless" except for inflating one's GPA. This kind of joking serves, without being overtly confrontational, as an open form of everyday resistance that signals dissent [2]. It creates a kind of shared understanding among students that "we all know this is ridiculous, even if we go along with it." Such mockery undermines the authority of the dominant narrative - in this case, that the only thing that matters is that one scores high or finishes first - by making it a laughing stock [6,13].

4.3 Emotional Withdrawal and Apathy as Dissent

Students reported a process of disillusionment where they "withdrew" emotionally from the race for grades. What at first glance would be constructed as apathy - not studying as hard, not engaging in class, are, in fact, a conscious act of resistance or survival. Student 19 admitted, "It is funny but accounting means nothing to me now. I will never ever study it after my degree," effectively announcing a personal withdrawal from the ideology that had framed their educational experience [2,2]. Instead of internalizing the competitive, profit-driven values being taught, what this student did was to simply stop caring about the field as a way to resist those values. Another student said they were "praying that this last year ends soon so I can get away from accounting." These answers may at first glance seem like quitting, but from a resistance perspective, they are a refusal to internalize the neoliberal script. Through "getting away" and refusing to play along beyond what is required, students resist the reproduction of the system because they refuse to become the enthusiastic worker-bees that the system asks them to be [2].

4.4 Subverting Career Aspirations

A striking form of resistance came through students' career choices and aspirations. In a business university context, the "dominant" expectation is often that top students will pursue lucrative jobs in big corporations (for accounting students, that often means aiming for one of the Big Four audit firms or multinational companies). However, many of our participants expressed alternative ambitions that deviated from this norm. For instance, Student 17 shared that he was passionate about research and wanted to publish a paper or pursue higher studies - something viewed as unconventional among his peers who were eyeing corporate jobs. "Some of my peers make fun of me, like 'what are you doing? Join the corporate side, earn money and get an easy life', but I will not!" he recounted (face reddening with emotion) [2,2]. That emphatic "I will not" is a bold act of refusal. By rejecting the chase for a Big Four job and choosing a path like academia or social entrepreneurship, students resist the narrative that success equals a high salary or a prestigious

corporate title. Another student (Student 1) echoed this sentiment by deciding to do a Master's in Entrepreneurship focused on social change, instead of an MBA in Finance. "I am no longer part of this rat race... I will bring some change in the next 10 years," declared Student 9, who switched to a Master of Social Entrepreneurship program [2]. These choices show agency in defining success on one's own terms. Even though entrepreneurship itself can be profit-driven, these students associate it (perhaps idealistically) with creativity and positive impact, in contrast to what they perceive as the morally empty toil of corporate accounting [2,2]. In effect, they are distancing themselves from the neoliberal notion that personal wealth and corporate achievement are the ultimate goals.

4.5 Collective Initiatives and Community Engagement

While there were no large - scale organized protests at UMT, some students have formed informal groups, clubs, or projects that subtly counter the neoliberal ethos. For example, Student 7 described how a few students banded together to create clubs that help local Pakistani small businesses with accounting and financial literacy - essentially volunteer consulting for shopkeepers or entrepreneurs in the community [2]. "The books are giving us nothing... we should fill this gap by looking at local jeweller shops or restaurants and understand accounting from their perspective," this student explained [8]. Such clubs allow students to apply their skills in a service - oriented way, prioritizing community benefit over profit. They consciously chose local case studies over the textbook examples of Apple and Microsoft, thereby reclaiming some relevance for their education and implicitly critiquing the Western - centric curriculum [2]. Another common goal expressed was to "do something for my country" (in the words of Student 1) rather than simply slot into the corporate machine [2]. In practice, this translated to student - led project ideas such as researching how accounting standards could aid Pakistani development, or how they are viewed by small local businesses [2]. These projects, though modest, represent grassroots resistance: students refusing to accept a status quo where their education is disconnected from society, and instead demanding an alternative approach that aligns with local needs and their own values [2], Reference [2]. Notably, these actions were not confrontational - they didn't challenge faculty openly or break rules. Rather, students worked around the system's limitations to create meaning for themselves. In infrapolitical terms, this is a quiet resistant move - staying within the bounds of what is allowed (forming officially sanctioned clubs or doing extra projects), but using that space to push a very different narrative (one of social responsibility and local relevance, which implicitly questions the neoliberal narrative).

Overall, these findings speak to our second objective by showing that students actively resist neoliberal accounting education in quiet and improvised ways. Their resistance is often couched in everyday behavior -- a joke here, a shrugged assignment there, a personal career decision, or a voluntary project -- rather than organized activism. These acts are not aggressive; students did not confront university authorities or stage protests during our study period. But they are meaningful, human-scale pushbacks against what one student called "the rat race". Through humor, withdrawal, alternative ambitions, and community-oriented efforts, students carved out small zones of autonomy and authenticity within an education system they felt was otherwise constraining. What is more, these acts were often covert or understated, which is to say, they could be conducted without punitive attention being drawn. For instance, a student can quietly decide not to vie for the

top grade -- and thus reduce stress -- without anyone labeling it resistance, except in their own heart where it feels like reclaiming control. Likewise, forming a study club to discuss social issues in accounting isn't against any rule, but subverts the intended focus of their program. In such ways, the students exercised their agency to show that they are not docile consumers of education but continuously reinterpret and subvert their educational experience to make it consistent with their own values.

5. Interpreting Student Resistance through the Lens of Infrapolitics

For our third objective, we elaborate on the above through the concepts of infrapolitics and hidden transcripts Reference [6,13]. This analytical framework shows that what we witnessed at UMT Lahore is not a case of incoherent student grumbling but a structured, if subdued, form of political expression by students negotiating an oppressive - or at least inhospitable - educational apparatus. We also discuss in this section how the lived experiences of the students and their acts of resistance are understood as infrapolitical practices and, correspondingly, what that entails for the workings of power inside the university.

They can be read as part of a hidden transcript: these students, who in the formal classroom or official settings often kept a polite public transcript -- completing assignments, listening to lectures, and seldom challenging teachers directly (none of our participants reported openly confronting a lecturer about the curriculum) -- expressed anger, sarcasm, and despair in one-on-one interviews (with the promise of anonymity) that would normally be hidden. Put simply, the interviews gave them an "offstage site" to share what they really think, as the hidden-transcript framework suggests, subordinate groups often create offstage critiques of power [13]. For instance, calling oneself a "robot" or the educational product "beasts of burden" is strong talk that students would not utter in class or to their professors' face [2,2]. These metaphors are part of the hidden transcript in which the students mutually reinforce the idea that "we are being dehumanized here." Similarly, their sarcastic joking about exam competitions and rote learning is part of the hidden transcript that mocks the official metric of success [2]. This offstage dissent, as noted in [13], is an important form of resistance because it preserves the group's awareness of false or injustices in the powerholder's version of reality. In our case, the students sharing jokes and complaints with one another is not just letting off steam -- it is a quiet declaration that they do not fully accept the neoliberal narrative they are subjected to.

Second, many of the behaviors we identified (humor, disengagement, covert group activities) align with the everyday forms of resistance discussed in [6,8,13] - incremental, often informal tactics that avoid direct confrontation. These are comparable to everyday acts of defiance such as foot - dragging, feigned ignorance, or other small acts that avoid direct confrontation [6,8]. In the university context, everyday resistance took the form of sabotaging the neoliberal script in minor ways: e.g., deliberately not giving one's all to an exam as a way to say "this isn't the measure of my worth," or using class projects to highlight social issues which the curriculum tends to ignore [2]. One student's narrative about intentionally "escaping" the accounting field after graduation can be seen as "flight", which the author in [6] notes is a classic response of the weak - - literally or figuratively removing oneself from the oppressor's reach [2]. By refusing to apply for Big Four jobs and choosing an

unconventional career, these students are quietly undermining the reproduction of the system (since the neoliberal education model relies on students aspiring to and filling those very corporate roles) [2,2]. Indeed, as the authors in one study pointed out, if enough students "desert" the expected career path, it acts as a "circuit breaker" in the cycle that perpetuates neoliberal practices [2]. Our participants' choices to pursue social entrepreneurship or academia over high - paying jobs exemplify this kind of infrapolitical exit.

Crucially, these resistant practices were imbued with a political intent that even when students themselves did not articulate such a framing. Intentions, such as preserving one's identity and morality amidst an onslaught of market values, can be read into the words and actions through an infrapolitics lens. For example, when Student 9 argued, "it's just going to be the corporate world and profits, and this cycle would continue for all my life... now I have changed my field," the student is making a political choice - a refusal to live one's life solely in service of profit [2]. The student perceives the corporate accounting career as a pitfall or a cycle of neoliberal values; by changing fields, they enact agency in search of what they feel will be a more meaningful contribution to society. There are clear synergies here with the argument in [15] that minor acts - such as choice of career or ironic utterances - can be framed as forms of "talking back" to hegemonic power [15]. Rather than having no voice, these students are talking - albeit within a hidden transcript - where they are "talking back" to the university system and its neoliberal values through their everyday choices and utterances [2,2].

The findings also lead us to believe that the infrapolitics framework is a very useful tool to make meaning of student behaviors that might otherwise be written off. Traditional educational research might refer to disengaged students as apathetic or less capable and humor as simply off - task behavior. Through the infrapolitics lens, however, we see another layer of meaning. When students joke about how their courses are useless, for instance, this is not just adolescent complaining - it is a form of cultural resistance, demystifying the authority of the curriculum. The act of zoning out or doing the bare minimum for a class that offends their values is not laziness but a withholding of consent, strategically delivered. These hidden transcripts - anger, sarcasm, ridicule, disengagement - are adopted by students who critique power in order to mitigate its effect [2]. In other words, these micro - resistances are coping mechanisms that, at the same time, chip away at the totalizing power of the neoliberal ethos. Every joke and every alternative project is a reminder to self and peer that "this system does not define us completely." Finally, we note that while each act of infrapolitics is small, in aggregate they can add up to a significant under - current of resistance. No one student deciding, for example, to pursue some non - traditional career will bring down the neoliberal model. But if many students pursue public service over private gain, or if year after year students silently reject rote learning while outwardly playing along, the long - term feasibility of the neoliberal model in education might be slowly undermined. As the author in [3] suggested, the buildup of hidden transcripts can sometimes precede a more visible challenge to power if circumstances allow. In our context, we observe that students' "hidden" critiques and actions exert pressure (to be sure, gentle) on the university: for example, faculty members who learn about students organizing their own local business help clubs might reflect on the need for local case studies; administrators who find that many top graduates are bypassing corporate jobs might reassess whether the curriculum needs broadening. The resistance is mostly

"infra" - below the surface - but by no means inconsequential. In conclusion to this interpretive discussion, the use of an infrapolitics lens has shown that Pakistani students' experiences and resistances are indeed political, even if they do not assume the form of conventional politics [6,13]. Students do a sort of cultural politics, pitting humanity, social responsibility, and personal dignity against a system that nudges them toward hyper-competition and profit. Without a theoretical framing that legitimizes subtle resistance, this insight could be missed. By theorizing students as active agents capable of creative dissents, we get a far more complex understanding of the power play in the neoliberal university. Hegemony in education can never be absolute; students find fissures in the system through which they express an alternate vision, however small those fissures may be. The nuanced comprehension satisfies our third objective by showing that the notions of infrapolitics and hidden transcript are not only applicable but also illuminative in the context of student life under neoliberal education. They help us appreciate the quiet acts of students as artful, resourceful, and profoundly human responses to an inhuman system.

6. Discussion and Conclusion

The present study set out to examine how university students in Pakistan experience, and resist, the neoliberal approach to education, and what their subtle acts of resistance mean in the larger scheme of power and agency. Focusing on UMT Lahore as a case, we found that students are acutely aware of neoliberal values embedded in their education-and importantly, they are not passive recipients of those values. Instead, through qualitative narratives, we found a continuum of everyday resistance strategies used by the students to cope with and contest aspects of their education that they found dehumanizing or misaligned with their ideals.

6.1 Summary of Key Findings

Students characterized their education in terms that highlighted its neoliberal nature: technical, efficiency-oriented, exam-focused, and market-driven. They felt their course work trained them as technicians for a global market rather than as thinkers or citizens for their own society. Most told us that this had left them alienated-using words and phrases such as "turned me into a robot"-and longing for a humanistic and socially relevant learning experience [2,2]. At the same time, students were not simply acquiescing in this fate. They resisted in small ways: joking and making sarcastic remarks that undermined the official story of success [2], disengaging from the competitive mania as a way to protect their sanity and values [2], and even making major life decisions (such as career trajectory) that ran counter to the neoliberal narrative of chasing prestige and profit [2]. Some took matters into their own hands to "round out" their education by doing community-focused projects on the side, implicitly criticizing the narrow curriculum [2]. These acts of resistance were largely quiet and inoffensive-no rules were broken, and to an outsider the students may appear "not very interested" or "doing something extra-curricular." Yet, from the perspective of infrapolitics, we read these as meaningful forms of student agency and voice.

6.2 Power and Implications for Education

If there is one implication of our findings, it is that students need to be considered as active stakeholders in their

own education, even if it is subtle. In most universities and colleges, administrators and faculty measure student engagement through attendance, grades, or participation in official events. Our research points out that there is a whole domain of student dis/engagement which goes unnoticed. When students feel something is amiss-let's say, a disconnect between what they value and what the curriculum values-they will try to assert their values somehow, whether by joking or slacking off in some domains or finding alternative outlets for expression. These signals may be misunderstood by educators unless these educators make a conscious effort to listen. For example, if a significant part of a class seems indifferent or even cynical, that could well be a symptom of a more significant problem-a mismatch between teaching and the expectations or ideals of students. Instead of branding such students as "unmotivated," this may be the time to ask what values or needs are not being met. Our findings from Pakistani students suggest that many desire an education that will acknowledge local realities and ethnic dimensions; they value a sense of purpose that extends beyond just finding jobs. Resistance was a manifestation of those desires because the current system wasn't meeting those needs. One implication concerns neoliberal hegemony in education. Much of the critique of neoliberalism is at the macro policy level-privatization trends, funding cuts, etc. What our study brings out is how that hegemony is lived and resisted at the micro level, in day-to-day student life. The fact that students resort to hidden transcripts (rather than open protest) suggests both the pervasiveness and the insidious nature of neoliberal norms in education. The hegemony is pervasive in that even students in a relatively privileged university in Lahore feel they cannot openly challenge it-no one, for example, tried to formally complain that the curriculum was too corporate-oriented. It is insidious in that it may co-opt students' behavior-they may still strive for high grades and good jobs even as they internally resent the pressure. On the other hand, the presence of infrapolitics does show that this power is not monolithic. In the cracks of formality, the human spirit asserts itself. Students find ways to humanize their experience-through humor, friendship, social projects-injecting values of solidarity, care, or national pride that the neoliberal framework neglects. Over time, these small acts can collectively challenge the legitimacy of the status quo. One interpretation could be that the clubs helping local businesses plant seeds for a more locally-grounded, socially conscious approach to business education in the future, led by students themselves.

6.3 Contributions and Future Research

The current study contributes to the literature through a thick, human - centered account of how neoliberal educational practices are navigated by students in a non - Western context. Past work has almost exclusively been theoretical or faculty - centered critiques; we contribute the element of student voice within Pakistan's higher education narrative, even using their words to illustrate concepts such as commodification and resistance. By utilizing the infrapolitics theory, we also make a methodological contribution - showing how this particular lens is valuable for education research [6,13]. Through it, nuances were uncovered that would not have been realized with traditional analyses of student behavior, thus encouraging researchers to look beyond the immediately observable in educational settings. For future research, one possible direction may therefore lie in broadening the scope beyond one institution. Comparative studies could check whether students at public universities in Pakistan, which may have different socioeconomic student profiles or ideological tilts, display similar forms of hidden resistance or whether their strategies differ. Secondly, a longitudinal approach may prove enlightening: tracking students from entry to graduation to observe how attitudes and forms of resistance

change, whether they grow more resigned or more resistant over time. Another potential angle is an assessment of the efficacy of these micro - resistances - do they, in any way, impact institutional change? For example, where a critical mass of students chooses to study social entrepreneurship, does the university eventually offer more courses in this area on social enterprise or ethics? Understanding the feedback loop between student infrapolitics and educational policy may be rather helpful.

6.4 Practical implications

to educators and academic leaders in Pakistan and similar contexts, our findings bear a message: listen to the hidden transcript. Students may not voice their discontent in official forums, but it does not mean all is well. To universities that aim truly to educate rather than credentialize, student feedback mechanisms need to be created beyond course evaluations -- perhaps town halls, student research conferences, or informal focus groups -- in which students are able to discuss what meaning they seek in their education. Taking some of these students' aspirations into the curriculum -- for instance, community-based projects, ethics discussions, or country-specific case studies added to courses -- might enrich it. Our study shows that students want an educational experience that is less alienating and more empowering. Setting out to address this does not mean sacrificing academic rigor or the acquisition of marketable skills, but instead involves broadening the definition of quality education to include human and social development. This could, in turn, lessen the need for students to fall back on resistance, as they should ideally see their values reflected in their education. In conclusion, the students at UMT Lahore taught us that beneath the veneer of compliance, a critical conversation about education is going on among students. They know they are in a "rat race," and many of them find a way to say, in effect, "we are more than competitors in this race." In acts of everyday courage -- the playing of a joke, making a personal choice, starting a new club -- they infuse humanity into an education that too often forgets it. Neoliberalism might speak loudly in policy discourse, but from below, the meaning-making by students is building a different direction. As researchers and educators, to recognize and valorize these humanizing sub currents can take us closer to an education system that students need not resist, as this would be in keeping with their hopes, identity, and the kind of society they want to build.

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