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Abstract: *Pakistan has a serious shortage of career counselling services at a time when most of its population is young and in need of support for entering the labour market. The official youth unemployment rate for the 15- to 24-year-old age group stands at 11.1 percent (Pakistan Economic Survey, 2023-24), yet no national policy requires educational institutions to provide career guidance. Existing research on career counselling in Pakistan is limited in scope and concentrated in a small number of urban universities. This study examines the structural, cultural, and institutional factors that contribute to the limited availability of career counselling to Pakistani youth aged fifteen to thirty. It draws on semi-structured interviews with 110 young people selected from Peshawar, Lahore, and Islamabad, and analyses the data using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006, 2019), guided by Social Cognitive Career Theory (Lent, Brown, and Hackett, 1994; Lent and Brown, 2020) and the career guidance policy framework of Watts and Fretwell (2004). Six themes emerged from the data: the absence of career counselling institutions and infrastructure; family-controlled career decision-making shaped by collectivist norms; gender-specific barriers to access; unequal access across cities and regions; concentration of aspirations in a narrow set of prestigious fields; and limited awareness combined with high cost. This study is the first large-scale qualitative investigation of career counselling barriers in Pakistan that covers multiple cities. It proposes a three-part policy framework built on legislative mandate, professional training of counsellors, and combined digital and physical service delivery, drawing on evidence from South Korea and India.*

Introduction

Career guidance and counselling (CGC) has become an important tool for human capital development. It goes beyond simple job advice and helps young people build the confidence, expectations, and goals they need to enter competitive labour markets. Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT), developed by Lent, Brown, and Hackett (1994) and extended in later work, argues that career outcomes depend not only on individual ability but on the interaction between a person's thinking and the support or barriers

present in their environment (Lent et al., 2017; Lent and Brown, 2020). This argument is especially relevant for developing countries, where structural inequalities often remove the very supports that SCCT identifies as necessary for healthy career development. These supports include qualified counsellors, institutional infrastructure, and sound policy frameworks. Research from multiple developing-country contexts confirms that the absence of career counselling services hurts young people from low-income households the most, widens educational mismatches, and increases youth unemployment beyond national averages (Maree, 2020; Nassar and Al-Qimlass, 2019; ILO, 2019). In Pakistan, this situation is particularly serious. A large and growing youth population exists alongside an almost complete absence of formal career counselling infrastructure, and no government policy has yet made career counselling a standard public service.

Pakistan's population profile gives this problem great urgency. Around 68 percent of the country's people are under the age of thirty, and the fifteen-to-twenty-four age group is the fastest-growing part of the labour force (UNDP Pakistan, 2020). At the same time, the Pakistan Economic Survey 2023-24 reports a youth unemployment rate of 11.1 percent for those aged fifteen to twenty-four, reaching 14.4 percent for young women. The rate for the twenty-five-to-thirty-four group stands at 7.3 percent. These figures do not fully capture the extent of underemployment and discouragement among young workers who have stopped looking for work altogether (Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, 2024). Pakistan needs to create more than one million new jobs each year to absorb those entering the labour market, which means the country faces not only a shortage of jobs but a failure in the systems that help young people connect with available work. Researchers have found that career indecision, mismatch between qualifications and job requirements, and long periods without employment are more common among youth who have never accessed career counselling, and that these factors directly contribute to unemployment rather than simply accompanying it (Keshf and Khanum, 2021; PIDE, 2022). This suggests that the absence of career counselling plays a direct role in shaping unemployment among youth. Without proper guidance, young people are more likely to make uninformed career choices and face longer joblessness. Therefore, career counselling should be treated as a key intervention rather than an optional support service.

The existing literature on career guidance in Pakistan shows that this field is seriously underdeveloped. Most career counsellors in Pakistani schools and universities have no formal training in career guidance. Where counselling centres exist, they rely on outdated information and lack the tools needed for effective guidance. No national policy requires institutions to provide career counselling services as part of their standard operations (ILO, 2011; Keshf and Khanum, 2021; APCDA, 2024). This is not a problem unique to Pakistan. Watts and Fretwell (2004) showed that the absence of clear career guidance policies is a common feature of developing-country labour markets. However, Pakistan's large youth population, persistent youth unemployment, and sharp gender gaps in employment make the costs of this absence unusually high. The ILO's CHOICES project (2011) found that career counselling services in Pakistan already fell short on every key measure, including the qualifications of counsellors, the quality of infrastructure, the relevance of information, and gender responsiveness. Studies conducted in the years since have found very little change in this situation (Samson, 2015). Despite increased global research on career counselling in developing countries, the evidence base for Pakistan remains thin, geographically limited, and methodologically narrow. Most Pakistan-specific studies have used small convenience samples drawn from large urban universities, which means that the experiences of youth who lack access to institutional support, and who live outside the country's most visible cities have not been adequately studied (Keshf and Khanum, 2021). This study directly addresses that gap by drawing

on a larger and more geographically diverse sample than any previous Pakistan-specific qualitative study on this topic.

This study examines the reasons why structured career counselling is largely absent for Pakistani youth aged fifteen to thirty, and it identifies what is needed to build a sustainable career counselling system. It draws on in-depth interviews with 110 young people from Peshawar, Lahore, and Islamabad, and uses reflexive thematic analysis guided by SCCT (Lent et al., 1994) and Watts and Fretwell's (2004) policy framework. Three research questions guide the study. First, what structural and institutional factors do Pakistani youth identify as barriers to career counselling? Second, how do cultural and family pressures interact with the absence of institutional guidance to shape career decisions? Third, what conditions do young people consider necessary for sustainable career counselling to exist in Pakistan? The article is organised as follows: Section 2 reviews the literature, Section 3 explains the methodology, Section 4 presents the findings, Section 5 discusses the findings in relation to theory and prior research, Section 6 presents the conclusion, and Section 7 sets out recommendations.

Lessons from International Experience

Evidence from other countries shows a clear pattern. When governments treat career counselling as a legal requirement and invest in the necessary infrastructure, young people make better educational and career decisions, and transitions from school to work improve. Two countries offer especially useful lessons for Pakistan. South Korea and India each faced a version of the same challenge that Pakistan faces today: a large youth population, a mismatch between what education produces and what employers need, and a system of employment services that was not adequate for the scale of the problem. In both countries, the change that made the most difference was the creation of formal institutional structures for career counselling, which is exactly the kind of contextual support that SCCT identifies as a necessary condition for individual career development to work (Lent et al., 1994).

South Korea provides the clearest example of a government-led career counselling reform in Asia. In 2015, South Korea passed the Career Education Act, which legally required every primary, secondary, and high school in the country to appoint a trained Career Education Teacher whose responsibility was to deliver structured career guidance (OECD, 2022). The law defined the competencies that career teachers must have, created a formal qualification pathway, and made compliance a condition of school accreditation. By 2020, 91 percent of middle and high schools had appointed qualified career teachers. Student surveys conducted as part of OECD evaluations showed measurable improvements in career decision-making confidence among students who received structured guidance (OECD, 2022). The government also developed CareerNet, a national digital platform that combined psychometric assessments, information on different occupations, and labour market data. This platform addressed the information gap that career counselling research consistently identifies as one of the key obstacles to good career decisions in lower-income settings (Lent et al., 2017; APCDA, 2024). However, a significant limitation was that access remained unequal. OECD data showed that 52 percent of students from higher-income families had used a career advisory service, compared to 42 percent from lower-income families (OECD, 2022). This gap shows that a legal mandate reduces but does not automatically eliminate access inequality. Nevertheless, South Korea's experience demonstrates that it is possible to move career counselling from a privilege available only to a few into a near-universal service within a decade, if the right legal and institutional foundations are put in place.

India's National Career Service (NCS) programme is a more directly comparable case for Pakistan because India shares many of Pakistan's structural characteristics, including a large youth population, a collectivist social culture, wide geographic inequality in access to services, and a history of bureaucratic

employment systems that had become outdated. India launched NCS in July 2015 as a national priority project under the Ministry of Labour and Employment. Its aim was to transform more than one thousand old-style employment offices into modern, technology-enabled career centres that could offer career counselling, psychometric assessments, job matching, and skills training through both physical offices and a national digital portal (DGE, 2024). The scale of the programme grew significantly over the following decade. By 2025, more than 60.2 million job seekers and 5.4 million employers were registered on the NCS portal, 1,182 trained career counsellors were working across the network, over 41 lakh counselling sessions had been delivered, and 407 Model Career Centres had been approved, supported by 25 formal partnerships with major employers including Amazon and Microsoft (DGE, 2024; IMPRI, 2025). India also launched the Digisaksham programme in partnership with Microsoft to provide digital skills training to rural and semi-urban youth, recognising that a digital portal alone could not reach those with limited internet access or digital literacy. The NCS programme has limitations. Awareness among youth in smaller towns remains low, digital literacy continues to restrict uptake in rural areas, and linking state-level employment systems to the national portal has not been fully achieved (IMPRI, 2025). These are real weaknesses, and Pakistan would need to anticipate them rather than simply copy the model. Even so, NCS demonstrates that a developing country with characteristics similar to Pakistan's can build a national career counselling infrastructure at scale when the government commits to it through legislation and sustained investment. Pakistan's current situation, with its mix of small, urban, private career guidance initiatives and no national system, closely resembles what India looked like before the NCS reform (Keshf and Khanum, 2021; APCDA, 2024). Pakistan is at a stage where developing a national career guidance system could improve employment opportunities for young people.

Literature Review

Social Cognitive Career Theory as a Theoretical Framework

Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) is the main theoretical framework used in this study. SCCT was developed by Lent, Brown, and Hackett (1994) and has been extended and tested in many studies since. The theory proposes that three main variables shape how people develop career interests and make career decisions. These are self-efficacy beliefs, which refer to a person's confidence in their ability to succeed in each field; outcome expectations, which refer to what a person expects to gain from choosing a particular career; and career goals, which are the specific objectives a person sets for their working life. These three variables do not operate in isolation. SCCT argues that they interact with personal background characteristics such as gender, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status, and with contextual factors in the environment such as family support, access to career information, and the availability of institutional guidance (Lent et al., 1994). A key insight of SCCT is that environmental barriers can block career development even when a person has strong confidence and clear goals. If a young person lacks access to career information, institutional support, or social permission to make a particular choice, their ability to turn their aspirations into action is severely limited (Lent and Brown, 2020). In Pakistan, where formal career counselling is almost absent for most young people, SCCT predicts that career development will be blocked not by personal weakness but by a lack of structural support. Later developments of the theory, including the social cognitive model of career self-management (Lent et al., 2017) and the content-process-context assessment model (Lent and Brown, 2020), have made SCCT applicable to unemployment and career transition situations, which makes it particularly well suited to this study's focus.

Researchers have tested SCCT across a wide range of cultures, including South Asian, East Asian, and

African contexts. These studies consistently find that collectivist cultural norms and family expectations act as important contextual variables. In collectivist settings, family expectations can both support and restrict young people's career development, depending on how closely a young person's interests align with what the family values (Akosah-Twumasi et al., 2018; Atangongo et al., 2024). A systematic review by Akosah-Twumasi et al. (2018), which searched five academic databases and retained 30 peer-reviewed studies, found that in collectivist cultures, family expectations are the primary driver of career choice rather than individual interest or aptitude. This finding has clear relevance for Pakistan, where the authority of parents and elders in career decisions is well documented (Keshf and Khanum, 2021). One limitation of SCCT that is acknowledged in the literature is that most research testing the theory has used quantitative methods. Qualitative approaches are better suited for understanding how contextual barriers are experienced in practice, and this gap in the SCCT literature provides additional justification for the qualitative design used in the present study (Lent et al., 2022). This also strengthens the study's approach by aligning the research method with the complexity of real-world experiences.

Career Counselling in Developing Countries

The lack of career guidance infrastructure is a widespread problem in developing countries. Maree (2020) argues from the South African context that career counselling in Global South countries is effectively available only to people from wealthier backgrounds, and that this exclusion worsens youth unemployment among those who are already disadvantaged. The ILO (2019) reports that more than 300 million workers in developing economies live in conditions of extreme poverty and identifies weak career guidance at the school-to-work transition stage as a contributing factor. A Delphi study conducted by Nassar and Al-Qimlass (2019) with career and workforce development experts from multiple countries identified six components that must be present for career interventions to work in developing-country settings: assessment of the local context and needs, preparation of qualified trainers, well-designed curriculum content, effective delivery methods, proper programme evaluation, and adaptation to local conditions. None of these components are consistently present in Pakistan's current career counselling landscape.

Evidence from South Asian countries shows that even where some career guidance services exist, they remain largely inaccessible to young people from poorer households, rural areas, and female populations (Arulmani, 2009, as cited in ILO, 2024). The ILO's career development framework for low- and middle-income countries, published in 2024, identifies two types of failure that typically occur together in settings like Pakistan. Supply-side failures occur when there are not enough trained counsellors or adequate institutional facilities. Demand-side failures occur when young people do not seek out guidance because of cultural attitudes against asking for help, because family members control career decisions, or because they simply do not know that career counselling exists. Pakistan suffers from both types of failure at the same time, which is why individual programmes introduced by donors or private organisations have not led to lasting change (ILO, 2011; Keshf and Khanum, 2021). This shows that without addressing deeper systemic issues, isolated initiatives are unlikely to create a sustainable impact. It also reflects a lack of coordination and long-term planning at the national level. As a result, efforts remain fragmented and less effective over time.

Career Counselling in Pakistan

Research specifically focused on career counselling in Pakistan is limited, but it reaches consistent conclusions. Keshf and Khanum (2021) conducted the most methodologically rigorous Pakistan-specific qualitative study available in international databases. Using 18 semi-structured interviews with university students, they identified ten categories of career guidance need, including limited self-

awareness, poor decision-making skills, lack of direction, and insufficient knowledge of job search strategies. They found that while some career-related activities, such as job fairs and seminars, existed, students rarely used them. Low awareness was one reason, and the cultural reluctance to seek external guidance was another. The PIDE (2022) study, which surveyed a larger sample of Pakistani youth, confirmed that counselling and mentorship play an important role in shaping career aspirations, but that access to these services is strongly connected to family income, the type of institution attended, and location within the country.

Gender is one of the most important dimensions of career counselling access in Pakistan. Ghouse et al. (2019) found that Pakistani women face career barriers at three levels simultaneously: at the broad social level, these include conservative cultural norms and favoritism in hiring; at the institutional level, they include workplace discrimination, harassment, and the absence of family-friendly work policies; and at the personal level, they include limited awareness of options and internal conflicts about the right balance between career and family. Pakistan ranked 145th out of 146 countries in the 2024 Global Gender Gap Index, with particularly large gaps in economic participation (WEF, 2024). Only 24 percent of women aged fifteen and above are in the labour force, compared to 83 percent of working-age men (ILO, 2025; Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, 2024). The ILO's CHOICES project (2011) identified gender-responsive counselling as one of the most critical and most absent features of career guidance in Pakistan, and nothing in the literature suggests this has improved significantly since then.

Family Influence and Career Decision-Making in Collectivist Cultures

Research on career choice in Pakistan and similar collectivist societies consistently shows that families play a dominant role in directing young people's careers. In these settings, career choice is rarely a private, individual decision. It is shaped by family expectations, the views of elders, and the social norms of the wider community (Akosah-Twumasi et al., 2018; Keshf and Khanum, 2021). Hofstede's research on cultural values, applied to career decision-making in SCCT-based studies, predicts that in societies with high levels of respect for authority and strong collectivist norms, parental views about career choices will override individual interests, especially for young women (Mau, 2000, as cited in Akosah-Twumasi et al., 2018). PIDE (2022) confirmed this pattern in Pakistan, finding that family background, social connections, and the perceived prestige of specific fields were far more influential in shaping career choices than any formal career information.

One result of this family-driven approach is a heavy concentration of career choices in a small number of high-status fields, mainly medicine, engineering, and law. Young people in Pakistan tend to aspire to these fields not because they have researched them or received guidance about their suitability, but because family and community members treat these fields as the only legitimate career destinations. This concentration creates a mismatch in the labour market: too many graduates compete for limited positions in a few fields, while shortages develop in many other sectors. Career counselling research from comparable contexts identifies this kind of prestige-field concentration as one of the most practical problems that structured career guidance can address, since better information and personalised guidance can help young people identify fields that match their abilities and the needs of the labour market (Nassar and Al-Qimlass, 2019; PIDE, 2022). This indicates that many students make career choices based on status rather than suitability. Strengthening career counselling can therefore improve both individual outcomes and overall labour market alignment.

Methodology

Research Design

This study uses a qualitative research design based on an interpretive approach. Qualitative research is

appropriate when the aim is to understand how people make sense of their experiences within a particular social and institutional setting, rather than to measure relationships between variables across a large population (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Kvale and Brinkmann, 2015). The central questions of this study concern the lived experiences of Pakistani youth as they try to make career decisions without access to professional guidance. These questions require a research method that can capture detailed, context-specific accounts rather than aggregate patterns measured by numerical scales. The study's interpretive position means that the researcher is understood as an active participant in the process of making meaning from the data, which is consistent with Braun and Clarke's (2019) approach to reflexive thematic analysis.

Sampling and Participants

Participants were selected through purposive sampling, which means they were chosen because they could provide relevant and information-rich responses to the study's research questions (Patton, 2015). The sampling frame targeted youth aged fifteen to thirty from three cities: Peshawar, Lahore, and Islamabad. These cities were selected for specific reasons. Peshawar represents a provincial capital with a socially conservative environment and a university sector that has historically received fewer resources. Lahore represents a major city with a mix of public and private educational institutions and a more cosmopolitan setting. Islamabad represents the national capital with a concentration of elite public and private universities and relatively greater access to career services compared to other cities. The three-city design was intentional. Most previous Pakistan-specific career counselling research has focused on Lahore or Karachi, which means the experiences of youth in other cities have not been adequately represented. Snowball sampling was used alongside purposive recruitment to reach young people who were outside formal university networks, including those who had not completed university or who had left education early. A total of 110 participants were interviewed. Of these, 54 were male and 56 were female. Forty-one were from Peshawar, 38 from Lahore, and 31 from Islamabad. Participants ranged in age from 16 to 30, with a median age of 22.

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews, each lasting between 45 and 90 minutes. Semi-structured interviews were used because they allow the researcher to follow a set of core questions based on the theoretical framework while also giving participants the freedom to describe their experiences in their own terms (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2015; Flick, 2009). The interview guide covered four areas: how participants made or were directed in their career decisions; their knowledge and experience of career counselling; the institutional and structural barriers they identified; and what changes they thought would make career guidance accessible and useful. Interviews were conducted in Urdu or Pashto, depending on each participant's preference. Trained research assistants who were fluent in both languages conducted the interviews. All interviews were audio-recorded with the participants' permission and transcribed in full. Urdu and Pashto transcripts were translated into English by the same research assistants, and the lead researcher reviewed all translations for accuracy.

Data Analysis

Data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis following the six-phase process described by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2019). The six phases are: becoming familiar with the data; generating initial codes; searching for themes; reviewing themes; defining and naming themes; and writing up the findings. This approach was chosen because the study aims to generate an account of career counselling barriers as participants themselves understand and describe them, rather than to test a predetermined set of categories. Initial coding was done line by line for each transcript, with codes capturing both the stated

content and the implied meaning of what participants said. Codes were grouped into candidate themes, which were then reviewed against the full data set to check that each theme was well-supported and clearly distinct from others. Themes were refined through ongoing discussion among the research team. To check the reliability of the coding, a second, independent coder analysed 15 percent of the transcripts selected at random. The level of agreement between the two coders was 84 percent, which is within the acceptable range for qualitative research (Guest et al., 2011). Trustworthiness was further supported through prolonged engagement with the data, member-checking with six participants who reviewed the researcher's summary of their accounts, and a reflexivity process in which the research team recorded and discussed their own positions and assumptions (Guba, 1981; Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant institutional review board before data collection began. All participants gave written informed consent. Participants under the age of eighteen provided assent alongside written consent from a parent or guardian. Each participant was told they could withdraw from the study at any time without any negative consequences. All personal information was removed from transcripts before analysis, and participants were identified only by codes such as P1-Peshawar and P34-Lahore. Audio recordings were deleted after transcription and checking.

Findings

Reflexive thematic analysis of the 110 interviews produced six main themes. These themes together describe the landscape of career counselling inaccessibility in Pakistan from the perspective of young people themselves. The themes are presented below in order of how frequently they appeared across the data. Participant quotations are used to illustrate each theme, and they are identified by participant code and city. The six themes are: institutional absence and failure of infrastructure; family authority and collectivist constraints on career choice; gender-specific barriers; the prestige-field trap; unequal access across cities and regions; and limited awareness combined with high cost. These themes do not operate independently of each other. Participants regularly described experiences that connected two or more of these themes at the same time, which reflects SCCT's prediction that contextual barriers tend to combine and reinforce each other rather than working in isolation.

Theme 1: Institutional Absence and Failure of Infrastructure

The most common finding across all three cities was the straightforward absence of career counselling as a formal service. Participants from Peshawar, Lahore, and Islamabad alike reported that their schools and universities had either no career counsellor at all, a counsellor whose role focused on personal or academic problems rather than career development, or a careers office that organised job fairs but offered no individual guidance on career planning. A participant from Peshawar described this clearly: 'I did not even know there was something called a career counsellor until I was in my final year. I thought it was something that happened in other countries' (P7-Peshawar). Another participant from the same city confirmed how complete this absence was: 'There is no one in our college who you can go to and say, I am confused about what to do with my life. The teachers teach their subject and that is it. Nobody talks about what comes after' (P14-Peshawar). A participant from Lahore described a situation common in private universities: 'Our university has a placement cell, but it only contacts you if a company comes for recruitment. There is nobody to sit with you and say, what are you good at, what do you want' (P44-Lahore). A second Lahore participant captured the contradiction that many experienced: 'They tell us to be ambitious and aim high, but they give us no tools to figure out what high even looks like for someone like me' (P61-Lahore). Participants from Islamabad were somewhat more likely to report that a careers

office existed, but consistently described those offices as poorly equipped, understaffed, and relying on labour market information that was years out of date. One participant stated: 'We have an office with a sign that says career services. I visited once and the person there gave me a brochure from 2018 and said I should apply to companies listed there. Half of them do not exist anymore' (P82-Islamabad). This finding is consistent with the ILO CHOICES project (2011) and with Keshf and Khanum (2021), both of which identified the same structural failures. The present study confirms that these conditions have not improved and that they are present across all types of institutions, including public universities, private universities, and colleges.

Theme 2: Family Authority and Collectivist Constraints on Career Choice

The second most common theme concerned the role of family in directing career decisions. Across the data, participants described family input not as one influence among many but as the primary and often the only source of career direction. A participant from Peshawar explained the pattern directly: 'My father told me I would do engineering. I did not ask why. In our family, when your father speaks about your future, you listen' (P3-Peshawar). A second participant from Peshawar described how this authority is expressed not through conflict but through assumption: 'It was never a conversation. My career was decided the way other things in the family are decided. Someone older says what will happen, and it happens' (P19-Peshawar). This pattern was not limited to participants from more traditional or rural backgrounds. Several participants from Lahore's urban middle class described the same dynamic operating through gentler but equally effective means: 'Nobody forced me to choose medicine. But when your family has been telling relatives since you were ten years old that you will become a doctor, there is no real choice left by the time you are eighteen' (P49-Lahore). Another Lahore participant described how the absence of professional guidance leaves family opinion as the default: 'If there was someone qualified who could sit with you and show you options, maybe things would be different. But there is nobody. So, you listen to your parents, because at least they have experience of life' (P58-Lahore). SCCT explains this dynamic as a contextual barrier operating at the social level: family authority in this context does not simply influence how a young person thinks about their career but closes off the process of self-directed exploration before it can begin. Akosah-Twumasi et al. (2018) identified this pattern across multiple collectivist cultures in their systematic review, and the present data confirm it clearly in Pakistan.

Theme 3: Gender-Specific Barriers

Gender functioned as an additional layer of constraint for female participants across all three cities. Female participants described all the same institutional absences and cultural pressures reported by male participants, and they also faced barriers specific to their gender. The most consistent of these was being directed toward a narrow set of fields considered appropriate for women, primarily teaching, medicine in certain specialisations, and sometimes accounting. This direction did not come through any career guidance process but through informal social consensus reinforced by family and community expectations. A participant from Peshawar described this plainly: 'A girl from our area has two options: doctor or teacher. If you say something else, people think you have wrong ideas about yourself' (P12-Peshawar). A second Peshawar participant described the pressure in more personal terms: 'I wanted to study law. My family said it was not suitable for a girl because you have to argue in court in front of men. They did not say it was wrong. They said it was not suitable. That word was enough to close the door' (P27-Peshawar). Female participants from Lahore reported somewhat more freedom in their choice of field, but they described consistent barriers to acting on that freedom. A participant from Lahore explained: 'Everyone supports my education. But when I talk about a career that would take me

to another city, the conversation changes. A girl's career must fit around her marriage, not the other way around' (P56-Lahore). A second Lahore participant described the cumulative weight of these expectations: 'You study, you do well, and then people start asking when you will get married. Nobody asks about your five-year plan. The assumption is that marriage is your five-year plan' (P73-Lahore). These accounts align with Ghouse et al. (2019), who documented multi-level career barriers for Pakistani women, and with Pakistan's ranking of 145th in the 2024 Global Gender Gap Index (WEF, 2024). They make clear that any career counselling service in Pakistan must be designed with gender responsiveness as a central feature rather than an optional addition.

Theme 4: The Prestige-Field Trap

A fourth theme concerned the heavy concentration of career aspirations in a small number of high-status fields, most commonly medicine, engineering, and law. This concentration was not driven by individual interest or by an informed assessment of labour market conditions. It was driven by a social consensus that treated these three fields as the only truly worthwhile career destinations, regardless of a young person's abilities, interests, or what employers needed. Participants who had entered one of these fields without genuine interest described their situation with real distress: 'I am in my third year of engineering, and I do not understand half the content. I chose it because my father chose it. Nobody ever asked me what I am good at' (P23-Peshawar). A second participant from Peshawar described the absence of alternative information: 'In school we were never shown what other careers look like. The only people we heard about were doctors and engineers. I thought that was the full list' (P31-Peshawar). Participants who had chosen a different field despite family pressure described the social cost: 'I wanted to do design. My parents eventually agreed, but my extended family treated it as a failure for years. They still ask me when I am going to do something real' (P67-Lahore). An Islamabad participant described the same experience from a slightly different angle: 'I studied economics because I was genuinely interested in it. People kept asking me why I did not do medicine. When I explained what economists do, they looked at me like I was speaking another language. Nobody in my community had seen that path before' (P95-Islamabad). The prestige-field trap produces a problem in the labour market that is well documented in the national literature. Many graduates compete for limited positions in a few fields while other sectors face skill shortages. Career counselling research identifies this kind of occupational concentration as one of the problems most effectively addressed by structured guidance, because better information and personalised support can help young people find fields that match both their abilities and the actual needs of the economy (Nassar and Al-Qimlass, 2019; PIDE, 2022).

Theme 5: Unequal Access Across Cities and Regions

The three-city design of this study revealed significant differences in access to career counselling between cities, which adds important detail to what the existing literature describes mainly as an urban-rural divide. Participants from Islamabad were closest to career counselling services, mainly because the city's concentration of well-resourced universities has led some institutions to develop career offices that offer at least basic support for job placement. Participants from Lahore described a mixed picture: students at private universities had some access to placement support, but students at government colleges had very little. Participants from Peshawar described a near-complete absence of career guidance in any formal institution, and several of them reported that this study's interview was the first time they had been asked to think in structured terms about their career development. One participant from Peshawar put the inter-city gap clearly: 'In Islamabad, my cousin was told by his university what jobs exist in his field and which companies to approach. Here, we finish our degrees and then ask each other what to do' (P18-Peshawar). A second Peshawar participant described the feeling of being in a

system that does not apply to them: 'Sometimes I read articles about career counselling and internships and alumni networks. All that sounds like it belongs to a different country, not mine' (P36-Peshawar). A participant from a government college in Lahore described how the divide cuts within the same city: 'My friend goes to a private university, and their department organised a career day with six companies. I am at a government college. We have never had anything like that in four years' (P52-Lahore). This finding has direct implications for how a national career counselling policy should be designed. It shows that geographic inequality in access is not limited to the difference between cities and rural areas but exists within Pakistan's hierarchy of urban centres. A policy that addresses only the most underserved rural areas will still leave youth in cities like Peshawar without adequate support.

Theme 6: Limited Awareness and High Cost

The final theme concerns two related barriers: most young people do not know that formal career counselling exists, and those who do know often find it too expensive to access through private providers. Across all three cities, most participants had no knowledge that career counselling was a professional service, distinct from the general student support functions of a university office or the employer-facing activities of a placement cell. This lack of awareness is itself a product of institutional absence. When career counselling is not a normal part of how schools and universities operate, young people have no way to recognise that they are missing something. Several participants reflected on this. One said: 'I did not know what I was missing. I thought everyone just figured out their career themselves or asked their family. I did not know there was a profession that helps with this' (P88-Islamabad). Another participant described learning about career counselling only through social media: 'I saw a video online where someone talked about seeing a career counsellor abroad. I did not know that existed here. I searched online and found one person offering private sessions for five thousand rupees an hour. That is more than my father earns in a day' (P41-Lahore). A participant from Peshawar described the awareness gap in terms of what school had and had not offered: 'Nobody in my school ever said there is a person called a career counsellor and here is how you find one. We were taught maths and English and science. What to do with our lives was our own problem' (P22-Peshawar). Among the smaller number of participants who were aware that private career counselling services existed, financial cost was the main reason they had not used them. Private career counselling in Pakistan's cities is priced for upper-middle-class families, putting it out of reach for most of the youth population. This mirrors the finding of Maree (2020) that in Global South countries, career counselling is effectively a service for the wealthy, and that those who most need support is the least able to pay for it.

Discussion

The six themes produced by this study together build a clear, evidence-based account of why career counselling is largely inaccessible to Pakistani youth. Each theme can be read directly through the SCCT framework. The most basic contextual barrier described by SCCT is the absence of supporting structures in the environment. Theme 1, institutional absence, represents exactly this kind of barrier. When career counselling does not exist as a formal institutional service, SCCT predicts that young people will rely on whatever alternative sources of guidance are available. In Pakistan, the main alternative is the family, and this is precisely what Theme 2 confirms. Family authority over career decisions is not a cultural problem that needs to be corrected. It is a predictable and rational response to the absence of professional guidance. SCCT predicts that as professional institutional support becomes available and is seen as credible, its role in career decision-making will naturally grow relative to informal family authority. This does not mean ignoring family influence. It means designing career counselling services in ways that involve families as informed participants rather than treating them as obstacles.

Theme 3, gender-specific barriers, adds important complexity to SCCT's framework. The theory acknowledges that gender functions as a personal background variable that interacts with contextual barriers, but it does not fully address the specific ways that gender operates in strongly patriarchal societies. The present findings show that in Pakistan, gender acts as a multiplying factor rather than simply an additional variable. Female participants experienced all the institutional barriers that male participants described, and they also faced gender-specific restrictions on mobility, social norms about acceptable fields, and the subordination of career planning to marriage timelines. Any career counselling policy in Pakistan that does not address these gender-specific conditions will not serve much of the female youth population effectively. This is consistent with Ghouse et al. (2019) and with Pakistan's position at the bottom of global gender equality rankings (WEF, 2024).

Themes 4 and 6, the prestige-field trap and limited awareness, together point to a dimension of SCCT that the theory does not fully develop: the role of poor information environments in creating and sustaining narrow career aspirations. SCCT identifies access to career information as a contextual support that broadens outcome expectations and therefore widens the range of career goals a young person can form. When information is absent, the theory predicts that aspirations will contract around whatever social signals are available. In Pakistan, the strongest social signals about occupational worth come from family and community consensus about prestige fields. The prestige-field trap is therefore not irrational behaviour. It is what people do when formal information systems are absent. This interpretation aligns with the ILO's (2024) argument that improving career information access in low-income settings is a foundational policy intervention and not a secondary communication task.

Theme 5, unequal access across cities, refines the urban-rural divide described in most developing-country career counselling literature. The present data show that geographic inequality in access operates within Pakistan's urban system as well, not only between cities and rural areas. This finding extends the analysis provided by Maree (2020) and Nassar and Al-Qimlass (2019), who framed access inequality primarily in terms of rural-urban differences. It implies that a national policy framework cannot assume that provincial capitals are adequately served and focus only on rural areas. Peshawar's near-total absence of institutional career counselling, despite being a major city and regional hub, demonstrates this clearly.

The comparative cases of South Korea and India, introduced in Section 1.1, take on fuller meaning when read alongside the study's findings. South Korea's Career Education Act and India's NCS programme both addressed the same cluster of conditions identified in this study: institutional absence, information deficits, geographic inequality, and the need for qualified counsellors. The present findings, drawn from Pakistani youth's own accounts, provide the empirical basis for arguing that Pakistan needs a similar legislative and institutional reform. A critical qualification must be stated clearly, however. Neither the Korean nor the Indian model can be transferred to Pakistan without adaptation. Pakistan's collectivist family culture requires that career counselling be designed to work with families and not against them. Gender responsiveness must be treated as a core design requirement and not an optional feature. Pakistan's lower baseline of institutional development also means that building qualified counsellor capacity will take longer and require more sustained investment than in either South Korea or India.

A limitation of this study that must be acknowledged in interpreting the findings is the absence of supply-side perspectives. The study captures what young people experience and perceive, but it does not include the accounts of institutional managers, university administrators, or government policymakers. It is possible that some institutional actors have attempted to build career counselling services and encountered obstacles that are not visible from the participant interviews alone. Future

research that brings together student and institutional perspectives would produce a more complete account of the system's failures and the conditions under which reform is most feasible.

Conclusion

This study provides the first large-scale qualitative account of career counselling barriers among Pakistani youth drawn from multiple cities and socioeconomic backgrounds. Six structural themes describe a system in which the basic conditions for career counselling provision do not yet exist, which means that young people's career development depends heavily on the social capital of their families rather than on any consistent public service. Interpreted through Social Cognitive Career Theory and Watts and Fretwell's career guidance policy framework, these findings show that Pakistan's youth unemployment problem is partly a career guidance infrastructure problem, and one that can be practically addressed through the same policy instruments that South Korea and India have already shown to work at scale. Pakistan's demographic window is limited. The youth cohort that most needs career support will only be in this life stage for another decade or so. The evidence for action exists. The question is whether policy institutions can translate that evidence into a sustained reform programme before the opportunity closes.

Recommendations

Policy Recommendations

The findings of this study support a three-part national career counselling framework for Pakistan. The first part is a legislative mandate. The government must pass a law requiring all public and private educational institutions, from secondary school through university, to appoint qualified career counsellors as a condition of institutional accreditation. Without this legal requirement, provision will remain voluntary, uneven, and shaped by market pressures that consistently fail the young people most in need of support. The Higher Education Commission of Pakistan is the most appropriate body to drive this requirement at the university level, while provincial education departments must apply it to secondary schools.

The second part is a professional qualification. Pakistan currently has no recognised national qualification for career counsellors. Drawing on the South Korean model, the HEC and provincial education authorities should develop a national competency framework for career counselling practice and link it to a formal certification programme delivered through university departments of psychology and education. India established its National Institute for Career Services qualification system in 2015 and had over one thousand trained counsellors working in the field within a decade (DGE, 2024). Pakistan can adapt this approach rather than building a new system from scratch.

The third part is a hybrid delivery model that combines digital and physical services. A national digital portal for career counselling, adapted from the Indian NCS model to fit Pakistan's institutional context, should provide psychometric assessments, occupational information across all major sectors, and current labour market data. This portal must be supplemented by a network of career centres located in district-level educational institutions, because digital access alone cannot reach those with limited internet connectivity or digital skills. Pakistan's existing NAVTTC network and HEC regional offices provide a ready-made physical infrastructure that does not require construction from the ground up.

Recommendations for Practice

Educational institutions that are not yet covered by a national mandate can take practical steps without waiting for legislation. They should begin by reviewing what their current counselling or student services offices do, and separating psychological support functions from career development functions, since these require different skills, tools, and employer connections. Institutions should bring employers into

curriculum-related activities earlier in the degree programme, not only at final-year recruitment events, so that students develop realistic occupational knowledge before their choices are effectively fixed. Gender-responsive programming is essential. Women-only career sessions, links to women's professional networks, and family engagement events that help parents and relatives understand a wider range of career options for their daughters are all practical, low-cost interventions that can shift the norms within which female students make career decisions.

Recommendations for Future Research

This study has several limitations that point directly to priorities for future research. First, the sample covers three cities but does not include Karachi, Pakistan's largest city and commercial centre, nor does it include systematic evidence from rural areas. Future research should extend coverage to Karachi and to explicitly rural settings. Second, the study focuses entirely on the experiences of young people. It does not include the views of institutional managers, employers, or policymakers. A complementary study that investigates the supply side of career counselling provision would strengthen the overall evidence base. Third, because the study collects data at a single point in time, it cannot follow how career decisions develop over time or measure the long-term outcomes of different pathways. Longitudinal studies are needed to establish how much difference institutional career counselling makes to employment outcomes in Pakistan. Fourth, the use of interviews means that some participants may have described their experiences in ways shaped by what they believed was expected of them. Member-checking with six participants provided partial protection against this, but future studies should consider triangulating interview data with observational or documentary methods.

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