Research Article

Seen and Heard: Combining In-Depth Interviewing With Social Messaging to Study the Lived Experiences of Gifted Youth in High Power Distance Cultures

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Abstract

Qualitative research with gifted youth presents unique challenges because of their tendency to display qualities such as perfectionism, overexcitability, and asynchronous development. Studying gifted youth in cultural contexts marked by high power distance between young people and adults can further compound these challenges by limiting gifted youths' feelings of psychological safety during data collection. As a result, gifted youth often withhold information or give perceived culturally appropriate answers to adult researchers' queries. Drawing on a larger phenomenological study of the formation of self-concept among eight Malaysian gifted youth aged between 18 and 25 years old, this article describes how an innovative application of combining semi-structured interviews with WhatsApp social messaging diaries helped minimize the power imbalance between the researcher and youth participants. The paper describes the unique methodological strategy of combining in-depth phenomenological interviews with WhatsApp diary entries to collect data from a hard-to-reach population. Specific techniques employed included using a conversational interview style, self-disclosing personal information to build trust, and validating participants' feelings and experiences are discussed. Open-ended WhatsApp diary prompts and an extended time provided a sense of anonymity which allowed participants to recall their past and discuss sensitive experiences. Combining these techniques facilitated in-depth exploration into the lived experiences and challenges of being gifted, and how giftedness shaped participants' self-concept. This is the first known study to document the use of social messaging applications as an effective journaling method for creating a familiar and safe space for special needs groups in high power distance cultures to share their experiences and feelings.

Keywords

gifted youth, high power distance cultures, conversational interviews, WhatsApp diaries

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Introduction

Field work with young people often presents unique challenges for qualitative researchers as field methods and decisions are often adult dominated. This power imbalance between researchers and participants can limit the autonomy and agency of youth to authentically voice out their lived experiences (Bradbury-Jones et al., 2018). The positionality of the adult researcher is a pivotal factor that can influence how power asymmetry between the researcher and participants is managed throughout the study, affecting the quality of the knowledge produced (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). To address this concern, research on and with youth has often combined methods to capture youth voices and experiences (Tilley & Taylor, 2018). For example, drawings have been used to complement interviews with young children (Tay-Lim & Lim, 2013), and special interview techniques have been used to gather data (Ponizovsky-Bergelson et al., 2019), including group interviews (Guthrie, 2020), photo elicitation interviews (Smith et al., 2012), diaries (Filep et al., 2017) and WhatsApp discussions (Kaufmann & Peil, 2020). These methods can be effective in encouraging youth to participate and empowering them to actively engage in research. Digital methods not only compensate for limitations in geographical distance or financial means but also provide an expressive space for young participants (Borner et al., 2023).

While there is growing interest in applying innovative techniques to collect data with children and adolescents, few studies have documented the unique challenges of researching gifted youth in the qualitative sphere. Engaging with gifted youth poses unique challenges including their lack of homogeneity in terms of personality profiles (Betts & Neihart, 1988; Cross et al., 2022; Reis & Renzulli, 2009), and their reticence around sharing their experiences with strangers, especially around personal matters (Niebrzydowski, 1994). Gifted youth who experience social and emotional challenges such as bullying, for example, have been shown to be reluctant to disclose such information to parents and teachers (Connolly, 2018; Jumper, 2019; Shechtman & Silektor, 2012). This suggests that stigmatizing issues such as depression or suicidal ideation may even be a more difficult topic to discuss (Cross & Cross, 2015; Jackson, 1998; Mueller, 2009; Winsor & Mueller, 2020).

The purpose of this paper is to extend the literature on conducting field research with gifted youth by demonstrating the benefits of combining methods that resonate with young, gifted participants from high power distance cultures. To manage the power imbalance between the researcher and the participants, this paper draws on a larger doctoral study focusing on the formation of self-concept among eight Malaysian gifted youth. Rather than analyzing data from the interviews or diaries as findings, which is common in empirical research papers, this paper aims to showcase the process of conducting interviews and using digital diaries. The study employed semi-structured interviews and WhatsApp—a widely used online application for text, calls, video, and audio messaging (Yoke, 2023) as a form of digital diary to encourage young participants to express themselves freely.

We first discuss the diversity of gifted youth as a target group and the challenges involved in studying them. We then review past literature on studies aimed at understanding self-concept among gifted youth and argue for the need to combine methods to adequately capture the nuances of how giftedness shapes self-concept. Next, we compare how gifted youth have been studied in high-power distance cultures versus Western cultures to illustrate how the limitations of past studies have restricted youth voices and limited insights into their lived experiences. To contextualize the use of semi-structured interviews and WhatsApp diaries, we provide a detailed process of the larger study employing these strategies in the methods section. In the results section, we detail how WhatsApp diaries were used alongside in-depth interviews to encourage participation and create safe spaces for study participants to share their experiences of being gifted. We use in-depth interview data and diary submissions as evidence to support our approach. We conclude by discussing the limitations of these methods and their implications for future research.

Giftedness and the Diversity of Gifted Youth

Giftedness includes exceptional intellectual abilities as well as a diversity of motivational and artistic capabilities (Hoge & Renzulli, 1993). Academically gifted youth are defined as students who have high cognitive abilities. Gagné (2004) defines giftedness as a person's natural or innate abilities that were not honed or trained, or those who have "outstanding aptitudes or gifts" (p. 120). These natural abilities may manifest in at least one academic domain resulting in a young person typically being placed in the top 10 percentile among peers of the same age. Domains may include STEM subjects, languages, sports, and even arts. Despite the various conceptions of giftedness, gifted youth may also share unique qualities that can negatively affect their development and self-concept, if not provided sufficient support by others.

Given divergent definitions of giftedness, the experience of being gifted is not unidimensional (Kerr et al., 1988; Kunkel et al., 1995). Gifted youth experience unique challenges such as asynchronous development (Silverman, 1997), and over-excitability (Lamont, 2012), which can lead to increased anxiety and insomnia as compared to non-gifted peers (Harrison & Van Haneghan, 2011). Previous research suggests that some gifted groups have unique protective factors, such as high intelligence, that act as buffers against negative mental health outcomes, reducing the severity of symptoms compared to their non-gifted peers (Bartell & Reynolds, 1986; Duplenne et al., 2024; Mueller, 2009). Regardless, mental health issues such as anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation do occur among gifted youth because of different internal and external factors including academic pressure, asynchronous development, low self-worth, family dysfunctionality, and poor social adjustment (Cross & Cross, 2015, 2021; Winsor & Mueller, 2020). This reinforces

the fact that gifted youth are not a homogeneous group and therefore experience life differently, especially in response to being labeled gifted (Berlin, 2009; Cross & Cross, 2015; Jackson, 1998; Manor-Bullock et al., 1995). The assumption that gifted youth are a homogeneous group may overlook the lived experiences of individual members and how they shape their self-concept (Prior, 2011).

Self-Concept Among Gifted Youth

Self-concept can be defined as how one perceives oneself in terms of physical, emotional, and spiritual aspects (Casino-García et al., 2021). Specifically, self-concept has been defined as our attitudes, feelings, and knowledge about our abilities, skills, and appearance in relation to social acceptability (Hoge & Renzulli, 1993). A positive self-concept plays an important role in the emotional wellbeing of gifted youth including their academic achievement and social adjustment with peers (Casino-García et al., 2021; Cross & Swiatek, 2009; Hoge & Mcsheffrey, 1990; Košir et al., 2016; Watts, 2020). Self-concept among gifted youth varies based on several factors such as their academic program, age, as well as gender (Peperkorn & Wegner, 2020). Being gifted often makes them feel different and sometimes isolated, especially when they feel that their peers treat them differently due to their giftedness (Cross et al., 1991, 1995; Manaster et al., 1994). This can influence how they navigate life's challenges.

Understanding how gifted youth perceive their own giftedness and how it affects their self-concept presents many challenges for researchers (Cross et al., 1995; Kerr et al., 1988; Peterson, 2012). Male and female gifted youth have been shown to process the experience of being gifted differently, which shapes their development of self-concept. For example, it was found that female gifted adolescents experienced declining levels of self-confidence and increased hopelessness as they progressed to senior year in high school. As a way to cope, they tend to hide their giftedness (Cross & Swiatek, 2009; Rudasill et al., 2007; Swiatek, 2002) and act stronger than they are to match the expectations of society (Kline & Short, 1991b). On the other hand, one study reported that gifted male high schoolers experienced more discouragement and hopelessness including feelings of anxiety, loneliness, and depression. As the male participants progressed into high school, they focused more on their careers and less on social relationships (Kline & Short, 1991a). Consequently, female youth might be at a higher risk regarding their self-perception of giftedness, as they could be more prone to concealing their intellectual abilities to assimilate with peers (Košir et al., 2016).

Studying Self-Concept among Gifted Youth in High Power Distance Cultures: Overlooking Individual Voices

Existing research on self-concept among gifted youth has been conducted primarily in Western countries. Past studies predominantly use quantitative approaches while only a handful of qualitative studies focus on the perspectives of the insider, especially on the meaning of being gifted (Coleman et al., 2007). Research on gifted youth in high power distance cultures is often designed in a way that limits the participants' voices, failing to provide actual accounts of their lived experiences. A literature review focusing on the lived experiences of gifted students conducted over the span of 25 years highlighted that gifted students often feel different and change their behavior in order to avoid social stigma (Coleman et al., 2015). While the review emphasized how different minority groups living in Western countries experience giftedness and how it shapes their sense of self, the review did not include any studies focusing on gifted students in high power distance cultures. These cultures prioritize the group over the individual (Yan & Haihui, 2005). Therefore, recognizing and nurturing the unique talents and self-perceptions of gifted individuals can be challenging. To overcome this, it is important for researchers to engage with youth participants from the perspective of the culture being studied. This includes employing research methods that consider critical cultural norms, including power dynamics between the researcher and the researched as well as potentially sensitive issues.

Previous research on gifted youth in high power distance cultures has largely relied on quantitative methodologies aimed at examining the relationships between gifted students' general and academic self-concept across different genders and age groups (Chan, 2002; Shi et al., 2008; Yan & Haihui, 2005). While these methods are effective in identifying variations in self-concept based on distinct factors, they often overlook the complex realities of being gifted by not fully representing the diverse perspectives of the gifted youth themselves. To delve deeper into the nuances of self-concept, researchers like Wang and Neihart (2015) have explored how gifted students perceive their academic self-concept and self-efficacy.

In high power distance cultures, gifted youth typically exhibit a positive academic self-concept (Yan & Haihui, 2005). However, they are also more susceptible to experiencing lower self-esteem in social and physical domains compared to their non-gifted counterparts (Hoge & Renzulli, 1993; Zeidner & Shani-Zinovich, 2015). Furthermore, those attending specialized programs often report a decline in academic self-concept. This is exemplified in a study by Shi et al. (2008) which reported a decrease in self-concept among gifted Chinese children aged 9 to 13. This decline was attributed to the children's increased tendency to compare themselves with other high-achieving peers as they grew older.

The social self-concept of gifted students may not align with how they perceive their academic abilities. Chinese students in Hong Kong who felt that they were different due to their giftedness perceived themselves as having low competence in forging friendships (Chan, 2005). The lack of nuance is also evident in Tsai's (2023) survey of Taiwanese gifted school students, which aimed to determine levels of perfectionism, self-perception, and cognitive mindset among gifted students. Since the researcher did not conduct interviews, the

study could not delve into the internal thinking of gifted youth. Consequently, it failed to capture the complexities of how perfectionism shapes their self-concept—insights that could have been valuable to educators.

Methods

Previous related studies help to highlight the fluctuating self-concept of gifted students within mostly Asian, high power distance cultures. Acknowledging that self-concept among gifted youth is a difficult issue for many young people to discuss openly, particularly in Malaysia, this study employed conversational interviews coupled with WhatsApp digital diaries to foster a motivating and safe environment for self-expression. This multi-faceted approach allowed the study participants to disclose challenges they experienced, coping strategies, and how their experiences shaped their self-concept as gifted youth.

Participants and Procedures

Drawing on the conceptual literature around the term "gifted" and situating the phenomenon within the Malaysian socio-educational context, we defined gifted youth as individuals who scored above 130 on IQ tests or were top scorers in the International Science Olympiads (Donoghue et al., 2000; Gagné, 2004; Hoge & Renzulli, 1993; Karp, 2011). According to the Youth Societies and Youth Development Act (2007), youth are categorized as individuals aged between 15 and 40 years old. In this study, we focused on gifted youth aged 18 to 25 years. This age range was chosen because participants in this group can effectively articulate their experiences, as certain life events hold particular significance at specific ages (Chawla, 2006). We also limited the age group to manage potential memory recall issues. However, researchers argue that memories can offer rich insights into participants' lived experiences (Blakey et al., 2019; Syed-Abdullah, 2023). By selecting participants aged 18 to 25, we aimed to capture the challenges faced by Malaysian gifted youth, providing a window into their lived experiences from a non-Western perspective.

Identifying and gaining access to academically gifted Malaysian youth not attending specialized educational programs was a challenge. Hard-to-reach populations may be reluctant to identify themselves due to the sensitive nature of the phenomenon under study. Hard-to-reach populations are often excluded from research due to inadequate data collection methods (Faugier & Sargeant, 1997; Raifman et al., 2022; Wilkerson et al., 2014). Past research on gifted youth in Malaysia has overwhelmingly focused on those enrolled in schools for the academically gifted who may have better academic and socio-emotional support than those who do not attend such programs (Alias et al., 2013; Ishak & Bakar, 2014; Yazid & Bakar, 2020; Yusof et al., 2017, 2021). This limitation ignores the reality of other gifted youth who may have experienced more intense psychosocial and educational challenges such as suicidal ideation, underachievement, and dropout.

We employed purposive sampling by approaching different organizations for the intellectually gifted. We then employed snowball sampling by approaching the heads of the respective organizations for names of youth who fit our sampling criteria. Following ethics approval by the university, we disseminated the screening tool (Google Forms) to interested participants. Parental consent was not required as the participants were between 18 and 25 years old.

The study consisted of eight participants yielding 15 face-to-face interviews conducted between April 2023 to May 2024. Three of the participants requested to be interviewed on Google Meet as two of them lived out of state and one was studying in the United States. All interviews were conducted in English. Interview questions focused on the challenges and support participants experienced such as learning in school, family dynamics, peer adjustment, and teacher-student relationships. Examples of interview questions were "How do you feel about school?" and "Can you describe your relationship with your friends from school?"

At the end of each interview, participants were asked if they wanted to participate in the diary session. Seven participants submitted their diary entries while the eighth participant requested it to be replaced with an interview. Participants were given the option to submit their entries either via WhatsApp or as a book entry. None of the participants chose to write their entries in a book. The diary prompts were sent via WhatsApp to participants individually. The prompts focused on two aspects: (1) participants' coping strategies and (2) how their experiences as gifted youth had an impact on their self-concept. An example of a prompt was "What do you do whenever you feel overwhelmed?" Participants were given 14 days to complete the diary, however, some participants asked for more time as they had work and travel commitments. Follow-up questions from the semi-structured interviews and diary entries were also conducted on WhatsApp over the course of several months.

WhatsApp was purposely chosen as the platform for the diaries due to the age of the participants and the sensitive nature of the study. The use of WhatsApp as a form of digital diary has been shown to be effective in encouraging youth to participate actively in research as they tend to be more open and contemplative when expressing their thoughts on digital platforms (Didkowsky et al., 2010; Rudrum et al., 2022; Theron et al., 2021). This can strengthen the rapport between participants and the researcher (Cornell & Grossberg, 1987). Within the Malaysian context, WhatsApp is perceived as an easy communication tool widely used in educational and social settings (Indiran et al., 2022; Lee et al., 2023; Yoke, 2023) and has benefitted young participants who are reserved and prefer to use messaging platforms to communicate rather than speaking face-to-face (Chan et al., 2020).

The following section describes the interview techniques utilized and the format of the WhatsApp diary entries, designed to encourage participation while minimizing power imbalances.

Results and Discussion

Three main approaches were used to create safe spaces during the interview portion of the data collection process: (1) employing in-depth, conversational style interviews; (2) finding common ground by disclosing information about the researcher; and (3) validating participants' feelings and experiences. The second results section discusses the use of WhatsApp diaries as a complimentary technique to give a sense of perceived anonymity and an extended time frame for participants to revisit their experiences, giving them a safe space to express their experiences without judgment.

Interviews

Conversational-Style Interviews. Within the phenomenological tradition, conversational interviews are typically semi-structured interviews that allow us to explore the phenomenon under study in great depth, and to focus the conversation on the meaning of the lived experience (van Manen, 2016). These interviews enable the participants to revisit their experiences by relying on their memories and reflections (Crotty, 1998). However, acknowledging that relying on participants' memories may present limitations, researchers are encouraged to employ suitable approaches to engage with participants (Lauterbach, 2018).

When discussing the participants' experiences being academically gifted, we began with ice-breaking questions to give them the opportunity to direct the conversation to include topics that they are familiar with (Dixon, 2015). Questions such as "Tell me about your family" gave participants an opportunity to describe whether they and their respective families knew about giftedness. When participants talked about their families, one of the issues that came up was the label of being "gifted." Out of eight participants, only three had used the term "gifted" with their families. Two of them, even though they scored within the range of being gifted in their respective IQ tests, had never used the term "gifted" until they decided to participate in the study. The other three participants, who were all top scorers in the International Science Olympiads, also never considered themselves academically gifted. The participants' ambiguity toward being labeled as gifted prompted us to adapt the interview questions according to terms they were comfortable with such as "your gift in math" for those who did not like the label "gifted." Although the implications of using the label "gifted" were not the focus of the study, the results show that such labels affected how the participants navigated their challenges and shaped their self-concept as gifted youth. Focusing on concrete examples such as the discovery of their academic abilities and talents allowed the conversational interviews to stay close to the experiences as lived (van Manen, 2016). A good interview is also one that explores the nuances and the reality between the research question and the experiences of participants (Ezzy, 2010). As such, we had to acknowledge that the participants may not necessarily identify themselves as gifted even though their IQ and achievement tests indicated that they were.

Self-Disclosure: Finding Common Ground. During the interviews, we tried to find common ground with the participants to minimize any perceived power imbalance. Not being academically gifted meant that we could have been perceived as an "outsider" or someone who may not have understood their challenges. However, realizing that we shared similar educational experiences with the participants, such as having attended school in Malaysia and having taken the same national examination (*Sijil Pengajian Malaysia* - SPM), we disclosed these experiences to establish common ground. When researchers reveal personal information about themselves to participants, it can create greater trust and open communication between the researcher and participants. This is particularly effective when carrying out research with vulnerable youth populations (Schelbe et al., 2015).

The rapport established proved to be fruitful in fostering trust, especially with participants who were uncommunicative at the outset of the study. Participant C, one of the youngest participants in the sample, had difficulty articulating his experiences and emotions early on. To address this, we shifted the discussion toward his personal interests to motivate him to disclose more about himself. For example, although he was talented in physics and math, he enjoyed reading about philosophy, particularly the meaning of life. He lamented that he found it difficult to find others to talk to about philosophy. In learning about this, we took the opportunity to share our interest in philosophy. The first author shared that she had a father who was a scholar in Islamic philosophy. This exchange around personal interests led Participant C to further open up about the challenges he had faced connecting with his parents and siblings about his interests. He said:

> I always think about this kind of stuff like the purpose of life and consciousness, for example...I always try to talk about this to my mom, but she just doesn't get it. She's just not interested.

Participant C later explained that one of the reasons he felt lonely growing up was because he could not find anyone to talk to about philosophy, including his family members. As a result of being unable to have meaningful conversations about philosophy, he described that it would often lead to daydreaming. For him, daydreaming in class became a challenge as he would get penalized by teachers for not paying attention. This affected his self-concept when he was a student. Without the exchange of personal information between a researcher and participants, it can be difficult for some researchers to ask in-depth questions, especially sensitive ones (Conolly, 2008).

In creating a safe environment for the participants to express themselves, the inspiration to undertake gifted education as a PhD study was discussed. Having a niece who displayed gifted behaviors and found it challenging to socially adjust

with same-age peers was the primary motivation to undertake the study. Participant K then confided about how difficult it was for her to find someone who could understand what she was going through as a gifted young person. Even though she came from a high-achieving family, she could not talk to anyone who would entertain the big questions she had. During the interview, she said:

> For example, your niece, she was reading in class because she was bored. And I think she wants that (to be stimulated) and she feels like philosophical questions can stimulate her intellectual curiosity. I couldn't do that with my family. And I obviously couldn't do that with anyone in school. I didn't feel like I got what I needed from anywhere or anyone around me. I think, you know, in primary school, I could still manage but in secondary school, it reached a certain point, it's just overwhelming.

Throughout the study, working to find common ground with the participants through sharing similar experiences proved effective in establishing rapport and enhancing the depth of the data. Building a sense of commonality can help the researcher achieve an "insider" position, even though the researcher may not share the same religious or ethnic background as their participants (McGarry, 2016). Having shared experiences and personal meaning with the study participants allowed us to gain significant insight into the complex challenges they experienced as gifted youth.

Validating Feelings and Experiences. Another technique used to address the power imbalance in the study involved validating participants' feelings and experiences during the interviews. Acknowledging that gifted youth often feel left out and misunderstood (Vialle et al., 2007), we listened intently to the participants' stories and validated their feelings to ensure they felt safe and accepted. Participant Z, for example, explained how he experienced suicidal ideation when he was about to sit for the Malaysian Certificate of Education (*Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia* - SPM). He described himself as a highly curious student who enjoyed learning during primary school. As he approached 16, however, he became demotivated as he felt overwhelmed by the immense pressure to obtain perfect grades for the national examination. However, he managed to pull himself out of his spiraling thoughts by focusing on the bigger picture—a meaningful life beyond exams. He reminded himself that he could focus on his passion for entrepreneurism once he tried his best for the national examination:

> There was hope for me given that I was quite in a dark spot during SPM because I had very low self-esteem. My value was measured by how well I could memorize science textbooks and stuff. The challenge turned into: can you genuinely do something that is interesting, genuinely helpful for society?

To show appreciation for disclosing such personal information, we made a conscious effort to validate his experience by acknowledging how SPM was indeed a very stressful time for all Malaysian secondary students who had to sit for the exam. This proved valuable in helping him feel more comfortable throughout the study and as a result, he began to open up more. To emotionally connect with Participant Z at that moment, we framed the interview as an "emotional communion" rather than a domination. This framing allows for a more open engagement between the researcher and the participant whereby both parties rely on one another to address the topic under study (Ezzy, 2010). Validating participants' feelings and experiences has been shown to be an effective way to encourage enthusiastic responses and establish trust (Ross, 2017).

On the other hand, some of the male participants were found to be rather shy and, in some instances, had difficulty sharing their experiences, especially in the first round of interviews. Despite submitting their WhatsApp diary entries, some male participants provided very brief descriptions of their feelings, while others took the time and opportunity to express their emotions and past experiences in detail. It took a series of follow-up communications over several months for some of them to lower their guard and disclose sensitive matters related to mental health, family conflict, and their wavering self-concept. From this, it can be inferred that gender may play a role in how participants respond and what kind of information they choose to share.

To better understand their role in complimenting in-depth interviews, the following section presents the structure of how the WhatsApp diary sessions were conducted.

WhatsApp Diaries

Based on the WhatsApp diary entries, the following section discusses how the structure of the diary method including (1) the use of open-ended prompts and perceived anonymity, and (2) providing adequate time for participants to respond to diary prompts encouraged participants to share freely in ways that would have been restricted through interviews alone.

Creating a Safe Environment through Open-Ended Prompts and Perceived Anonymity. The questions that were constructed in the WhatsApp diaries were open-ended but focused (Kaun, 2010). Open-ended here refers to having no predetermined word limitations. We aimed to make the diary entries focused by having several prompts to encourage participants to reflect on their lived experiences while they were still in school. The prompts were designed to encourage participants to talk about sensitive topics, especially how their experiences as academically gifted individuals shaped their self-concept. Diaries are an effective method to gain an understanding of the lived experiences of sensitive topics such as young people living with HIV (Mupambireyi & Bernays, 2019). This could be likened to having an imagined reader while maintaining anonymity (Dillon, 2011). Using diaries allowed the participants to express themselves in a more intimate manner, confiding about sensitive issues such as family problems, mental health,

and their wavering self-concept (Kaufmann & Peil, 2020; Kaun, 2010). For example, one of the prompts we used asked whether anyone had assisted the participants in coping with their stress. According to Participant C, he did not have an avenue to talk about his anxiety and perfectionist tendencies to his parents. In his diary, he wrote:

> My parents aren't very understanding of mental health. Quite a taboo topic in Asia, I would say. Many times, I've tried talking to my mom about issues I'm facing and very often it'll lead to lectures where she'll be doing all the talking and I'm just listening, not even talking about what I'm experiencing.

Some of the participants also opened up about their perfectionism and how they struggled to define themselves beyond academic grades. Participant R, for example, was gifted in math and won the International Science Olympiads (the name of the competition is not revealed to protect anonymity). However, he would always compare himself to his peers and would feel incompetent if he did not achieve perfect scores. This affected his self-concept and undermined his efforts to attempt everyday tasks such as driving. In his diary submission, he wrote about how he tried to define himself beyond academic achievement:

> As I progress to be older, I see more and more amazing people. To the point where comparing in terms of test scores, achievements seem meaningless. There are times when I feel I'm not good enough in certain aspects, but I no longer feel bad and fall into the abyss to heal myself. If it's something I hope to improve on, I ask them for tips to improve on it. I am myself and have my own traits. I don't see myself as the one almighty gifted student. I'm just a regular person with a passion for math.

From his diary submission, we learned that his self-concept faltered when he interacted with other high-achieving students as he struggled to find meaning within himself. However, he learned to adopt a growth mindset by acknowledging that with gifts and talents, there are always limitations that can be improved upon by learning from others.

Not all participants expressed themselves at length in the WhatsApp diaries. Two of the participants provided entries that were vague and brief. With Participant S, for example, several follow-up sessions had to be conducted through WhatsApp to gain clarification about his diary submission. Withholding information is within the rights of study participants but can also indicate an attempt to control information (Råheim et al., 2016). In one such incident, Participant S explained how he grappled with his self-concept when he first participated in one of the International Science Olympiads. In his diary, he wrote:

> In competitions, there will always be someone younger and better. I have had moments in the past where I felt like I don't learn fast enough, or I am improving too slowly compared to others and it

did eat me from the inside. This was true to some extent; I did learn and improve slower in comparison to some subset of competitors. I think it was a hard pill to swallow; accepting that innate talent is a factor in competition and that you might have just not been born with the same talents as others or drew a worse hand being born to worse conditions financially and environmentally, both are equally difficult to accept because neither was a decision you had before you were alive.

In this manner, the diary entries allowed us to ask follow-up questions that enhanced the depth and context of the interviews. Studies that employ diaries in conjunction with in-depth interviews often achieve a deeper understanding of the research questions than those relying on interviews alone (Saeidzadeh et al., 2021). We were curious to understand how Participant S arrived at his "self-philosophy." We contacted him via WhatsApp and asked how he came to those thoughts to which he replied:

> It stemmed from the period when I was still actively competing, I was stuck at some rating for a long time while some peers were shooting way past it. I don't live in a wealthy family compared to other people. I live with my single mother in an RM 800 rent apartment even though the divorce is not official on paper.

Using diaries in this manner provided us with greater insight into how the divorce caused Participant S to harbor resentment, which further affected his self-concept when comparing himself to his peers. He explained that after his mother decided to seek divorce from his father, they were happier as a family. However, growing up with financial restrictions made him realize he was trapped in economic inequalities while his peers were not. At a young age, he was angry not only because of the financial burden they experienced, but also because he had to accept that his father was no longer in the picture. In the follow-up that was conducted on WhatsApp, Participant S wrote:

> I don't think I will say much past this. In short, my mom was unhappy before the divorce and by extension, I was also unhappy. My father isn't a man that loved his children and I had to accept that at a young age. This added to the frustration of being angry at inequalities between me and other people.

From subsequent follow-ups, it was evident that the divorce was a delicate matter that affected his self-concept, as the financial constraints caused him to feel negative emotions.

Using Time Frames to Provide Room for Memory Recall. Apart from the open-ended structure of the diaries, having a determined time frame for participants to submit their entries was also beneficial as it gave them more time to recollect their past experiences. Having a dedicated time frame of 14 days for participants to write their diary entries was not excessively long. Although most diary studies normally employ several weeks or even months as a time frame, we understood that the

participants were busy – as some of them were working and preparing for university applications. Reducing the time frame of diary keeping and having targeted prompts is one way to encourage participation (Arndt & Rose, 2023). However, we also asked participants regularly if they needed more time to complete the diary entries as some of them had difficulty expressing themselves at the outset.

Although Participant V was articulate and forthcoming during face-to-face interviews, the diary entries gave her time to recall and provide answers that were more meaningful than interviews alone. She wrote:

> The study was definitely interesting for me, remembering back a lot of past memories and experiences (smiley face emoji) and knowing it can help with your study is a good feeling too. I didn't mind both the interview and diary but preference-wise the diary gave me more time to think about my answer and I felt like it allowed me to give a better answer.

Participant V's reflection echoes the feelings of some participants in diary research. A study on the experiences of giving birth and working from home during the COVID-19 pandemic indicated that participants benefited from processing their private experiences and emotions (Rudrum et al., 2022). Participants in diary research may establish a close relationship with the imagined reader and the diary itself, thus encouraging greater engagement in the study (Kaun, 2010).

During the face-to-face interviews, some of the participants had difficulty recalling memories. Revisiting memories during an interview is a common challenge (Lauterbach, 2018). Participant C confided that he had "memory problems" due to his constant daydreaming in school. During the first cycle of face-to-face interviews, he had trouble recalling certain experiences. As such, he also acknowledged that the WhatsApp diary was effective as it gave him more time to recollect his past experiences. After the second round of interviews, Participant C preferred the diary entry as it eased his social anxiety. He expressed this during a follow-up via WhatsApp which he wrote:

> Honest opinion, the interviews were great, but I was just very anxious socially (haha), so I think for me personally, the interviews weren't very effective, though I prefer real life talking. The diaries allowed me to think much more thoroughly.

After the Study: Participant Reflections on the Method

Overall, the participants expressed that they were glad to be part of the study as they were able to rediscover their identities. Participant D described how he felt about the study:

> Hmmm, I guess you can say that I felt glad. Because there aren't many people that I know of who are interested in gifted students. So being able to be involved in this study allowed me to appreciate my identity.

Similarly, Participant R expressed that participating in the study enabled him to gain some clarity about his academic abilities and his view on academic giftedness:

> Even though it's quite time-consuming (due to university admissions and A-levels) I'm generally positive about the research. Personally, I feel heard, and the journaling clarifies part of my own uncertainty (what's my stance on being called gifted). Glad to have participated!

There were other indications that participants benefitted from participating in the study. Participant C shared that the study allowed him to rediscover himself since there were many issues that he was struggling with. It was not until the diary submission that he realized that all this while, he had been putting aside these issues such as perfectionism and intensities that he failed to acknowledge.

Some participants preferred being interviewed face-to-face rather than writing diary entries as they were not used to the autonomy given to them to express their feelings. Participant S, for example, preferred the face-to-face interviews because they were "more straightforward and concise." Similarly, Participant R explained that he felt that the interview could give the researcher "greater control towards the direction of the interview to keep the input relevant." Participant J also preferred the interviews as the diary session was "troublesome" because he had to type it out. Some of the participants' feelings of reluctance with the WhatsApp diary indicated that although adult researchers may try to use creative and fun research methods, it may not encourage young participants to engage in the study the way one intended (Jonsson et al., 2022).

Strengths and Challenges

Through our work with gifted youth participants, we attempted to illustrate the benefits of combining face-to-face interviews with WhatsApp diary entries. We have done so by discussing how different techniques were used to encourage the participants to speak freely about being gifted and how it shapes their self-concept. These methods have created a non-direct, familiar, and safe space for them to share their experiences and feelings.

The data gathered through face-to-face interviews and digital diaries were meaningful and provided detailed accounts of their experiences. Important aspects of the methods employed during the interviews were finding common ground and validating participants' feelings. The digital diary gave a sense of perceived anonymity for participants who were reserved as well as an extended timeframe for those who were busy and needed time to recall their lived experiences.

It is important to note, however, that the success of gathering meaningful data was also based on a few factors. First, the researcher had to establish rapport with the participants and explain how their participation in the study would contribute to helping other gifted youth. This has certainly encouraged their participation throughout the entire study

despite it being time-consuming. Secondly, granting autonomy to participants to choose how they would like to share their feelings and experiences in the diary session gave them the flexibility of how they wished to participate. Thirdly, this group of participants were very familiar with using WhatsApp as it is commonly used among Malaysians (Indiran et al., 2022; Lee et al., 2023; Yoke, 2023) and gave them a sense of ease while participating in the research. For other groups, other software or mobile applications that have similar features should be considered. In line with past research, the findings suggest that using innovative research methods resonates well with youth participants. Most importantly, this is also a reflection of how the digital world has shaped how youth participants express themselves (Borner et al., 2023) and how researchers can gather data.

Diary submissions have indeed been effective in eliciting rich and nuanced accounts (Filep et al., 2017), however, several challenges must be highlighted in this study. Diary studies have been argued to be underused within the phenomenological approach (Morrell-Scott, 2018), especially within the educational setting (Arndt & Rose, 2023). Due to the lack of literature on how diary studies have been conducted in great detail, we experienced several challenges in designing the diary session at the beginning of the study. It was not until we conducted the pilot study that we discovered the need to adjust the approach, such as in writing clearer prompts, being flexible with deadlines, and the possibility of switching the diary session with an interview. The diary session also had to include a series of follow-ups as some of the participants wrote very brief responses in their diaries. Most of the participants requested the follow-ups to be conducted via WhatsApp, while the others preferred to have a face-to-face interview. As the techniques used in this method evolved based on the participants' responses and availability, its use must be studied more systematically in future studies to establish its benefits and limitations.

Conclusions and Implications for Future Research

Semi-structured interviews and WhatsApp diaries can offer rich insight into a phenomenon especially when working with participants who may not be forthcoming in traditional interviews alone. Although the participants in the current study were between 18 and 25 years old, many of them were reserved and not able to express themselves clearly at the outset of the study. The combined methods of interviews and diaries elicited rich insights into the lives of gifted youth struggling to define themselves beyond academic achievement and helped them to rediscover themselves. We believe this is an important contribution of the study. The use of WhatsApp diaries, a communication method already familiar to the study participants, helped them express about perfectionism, mental health issues, and personal family matters such as divorce which affected their self-concept. More importantly, participants were only able to define themselves beyond academic achievement after accepting that academic giftedness comes with limitations in abilities.

Previous studies attempting to center the voices of gifted youth tend to reflect the realities of Western communities. This is the first known study to showcase the lived experiences of academically gifted youth outside of a Western socio-cultural lens. The combination of semi-structured interviews and WhatsApp diaries was an effective strategy to facilitate critical reflection on past experiences, offering rich insight into the lives of gifted youth from a collectivist cultural perspective. Considering that phenomenology centers on capturing life as it is truly lived (van Manen, 2020), innovative methods may be especially important for documenting the experiential and emotional depth of such young people (Scott, 2022). Further research on using innovative methods that resonate with youth participants would be advantageous as this seems to be a favorable procedure for potential groups that may have challenges expressing how they feel and recalling their experiences.

Compared to traditional interviews, written digital diary entries place lower response pressure on participants (Bueno-Roldan & Roder, 2022) as they are able to answer according to their convenience. This increases the possibility of earnest answers and frequent texting. Lastly, when designing a study that is sensitive and includes youth participants, future research should consider the power dynamics between the researcher and the researched. For example, the profile of the participants, their ethnic background, gender, as well as how they would potentially respond to certain issues must be taken into account. Researchers must anticipate that certain issues may be seen as sensitive to participants and therefore, strategies will need to be developed to ensure that data gathering can be conducted effectively with great care.

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Data Availability Statement

Data generated for this study will be made available upon request.

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