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Identifying Dimensions of Social Withdrawal in Academically Gifted Youth

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A B S T R A C T

Objective: This study aimed to explore the underlying dimensions of social withdrawal in academically gifted adolescents through a qualitative lens, focusing on emotional, social, academic, and behavioral factors.

Methods and Materials: A qualitative research design was employed using semi-structured interviews with 27 academically gifted adolescents aged 12 to 18 years from various regions in the United States. Participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure diversity in gender, ethnicity, and school setting. Data collection continued until theoretical saturation was reached. All interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed thematically using NVivo software, following a multi-stage coding process involving open, axial, and selective coding to extract key themes and subthemes.

Findings: Thematic analysis revealed four main categories contributing to social withdrawal in gifted adolescents: emotional and psychological drivers, peer and social environment, academic and institutional context, and coping and withdrawal strategies. Subthemes included fear of rejection, perfectionism, social anxiety, peer mismatch, bullying, academic overload, and digital escape, among others. Participants described both internal vulnerabilities and external pressures leading to voluntary isolation. While some withdrawal behaviors were associated with emotional distress, others served as self-protective strategies to maintain control and authenticity in unsupportive environments. Quotations from participants illustrated the complexity and depth of these experiences.

Conclusion: Social withdrawal in academically gifted youth is a multidimensional phenomenon shaped by a dynamic interaction between personal dispositions and environmental conditions. Recognizing both the risks and adaptive aspects of withdrawal is essential for designing responsive educational and psychological support systems.

Keywords: *Gifted adolescents, social withdrawal, emotional development, qualitative research, peer relationships, coping strategies, educational environment.*

1. Introduction

Academically gifted youth are often celebrated for their intellectual potential and academic achievements. However, beneath their exceptional capabilities lies a complex and often overlooked psychological landscape. While giftedness is commonly associated with positive traits such as high intelligence, creativity, and academic success, it is also correlated with unique emotional and social challenges that may predispose these individuals to social withdrawal. The interplay between giftedness and social adaptation has become an increasingly significant topic of inquiry in the field of educational psychology, particularly as it pertains to the emotional well-being and long-term development of gifted adolescents (Sternberg, 2024).

Social withdrawal refers to the consistent avoidance of peer interactions, voluntary isolation, and a reduced desire or ability to engage in social contexts. In gifted youth, this behavior may stem from a mismatch between cognitive and emotional development, heightened sensitivity, perfectionistic tendencies, or negative social experiences such as bullying or peer rejection (Godor et al., 2020). While some level of solitude can be adaptive and reflective of internal processing, chronic social withdrawal during adolescence—a developmental stage marked by increasing peer influence and identity formation—can be maladaptive and result in emotional distress and impaired interpersonal skills (Peterson et al., 2021).

Gifted adolescents face a unique set of psychosocial stressors that are not always visible in academic settings. These include elevated expectations from teachers and family, internalized performance standards, and difficulties relating to age-peers who may not share their intellectual interests (Neihart et al., 2021). The resulting emotional burden may manifest as anxiety, depression, or a retreat from social contexts. In fact, research indicates that intellectually gifted students often exhibit higher levels of social anxiety and depressive symptoms compared to their non-gifted peers (Ghasemi et al., 2023). The emotional intensity and overexcitabilities frequently observed in gifted youth further exacerbate these issues, creating a feedback loop that reinforces social isolation (Pfeiffer, 2018).

One critical factor contributing to social withdrawal in gifted adolescents is their perceived emotional and interpersonal disconnection from peers. Many gifted students report feeling misunderstood, marginalized, or out of sync with their age group due to differing values, vocabulary, and intellectual interests (Bakaeva & Valuiskaya, 2019). The asynchronous development often characteristic of gifted individuals—where cognitive abilities significantly outpace emotional maturity—can hinder their ability to navigate complex social landscapes, thereby fueling withdrawal (Peterson & Jen, 2018). In such contexts, the school environment can either act as a protective factor through inclusive and supportive practices or amplify the risk of withdrawal through neglect or stigmatization (Krasa, 2023).

A growing body of research highlights the association between the emotional regulation difficulties of gifted students and their tendency to disengage socially. Emotional regulation—the ability to manage and respond to emotional experiences appropriately—is essential for forming and maintaining peer relationships. Inadequate emotional regulation has been found to impair social problem-solving skills and increase the likelihood of internalizing behaviors such as withdrawal and rumination (Qatawneh & Zaq, 2024). Gifted adolescents with poor emotional self-awareness may suppress or hide their feelings to avoid vulnerability, leading to emotional isolation even within group settings (Albright & Montgomery, 2023).

From a socio-cultural perspective, the experiences of gifted youth are often shaped by educational systems and societal norms that may not accommodate their psychological complexity. For instance, in certain school contexts, giftedness is narrowly defined by academic performance, leaving emotional and social needs unaddressed (Tatlılıoğlu, 2023). This issue is compounded when gifted programs emphasize competition and individual achievement over cooperation and emotional development (Moreau et al., 2022). As a result, students may feel pressure to conform to an idealized version of "giftedness," which in turn discourages them from expressing vulnerability or seeking social support (Larionova et al., 2021).

The school environment plays a crucial role in mediating social behaviors among gifted students. Research conducted across various educational contexts suggests that a lack of teacher awareness and training in social-emotional learning for gifted youth can result in missed opportunities for early intervention (Darbani, 2023). In many cases, teachers may mistakenly interpret a student's withdrawal as disinterest or noncompliance rather than as a signal of emotional distress (Göksu et al., 2024). Inclusive extracurricular programs and emotional intelligence training have shown promising outcomes in enhancing the well-being and peer relationships of gifted adolescents (García et al., 2021). Yet, such

interventions remain inconsistently implemented across different educational systems.

Social identity formation during adolescence is another relevant psychological process influencing withdrawal behaviors. As adolescents begin to construct their sense of self, the tension between belonging and authenticity becomes especially salient for gifted students (Shcherbinina, 2020). When their authentic interests or ways of thinking diverge significantly from the dominant peer culture, gifted adolescents may choose to withdraw rather than compromise their identity. In such cases, social withdrawal may serve as a form of self-preservation rather than dysfunction. However, prolonged withdrawal can lead to feelings of loneliness, decreased self-efficacy, and reduced resilience in the face of social challenges (Yildirim & Çelikkol, 2024).

Importantly, social withdrawal in gifted adolescents is not a homogeneous phenomenon but varies widely depending on personality traits, cultural context, and access to support systems. For example, resilience and perceived social support have been found to buffer the negative effects of withdrawal, enabling some gifted students to maintain well-being despite reduced social engagement (Oğurlu et al., 2016). Psychoeducational programs specifically designed for gifted adolescents have also shown efficacy in strengthening emotional resilience and reducing maladaptive withdrawal patterns (Yağbasanlar & Балоглу, 2025). These programs typically integrate social-emotional learning, mindfulness, and communication skills training to equip students with strategies to navigate interpersonal challenges.

Understanding the multidimensional nature of social withdrawal among academically gifted youth is critical for developing targeted interventions and educational policies. Existing studies have largely focused on quantitative assessments of emotional and behavioral problems or on case studies of high-achieving students. While informative, these approaches often fail to capture the nuanced lived experiences and subjective meanings that gifted adolescents assign to their social behaviors. Qualitative research, particularly through in-depth interviews, offers a valuable lens for examining how gifted youth interpret, rationalize, and cope with social withdrawal in everyday contexts (Urben et al., 2018).

The present study seeks to fill this gap by qualitatively exploring the dimensions of social withdrawal as experienced and described by academically gifted youth in the United States. Specifically, it investigates the emotional, interpersonal, academic, and coping-related factors that contribute to their withdrawal from social interaction. By centering the voices of gifted adolescents themselves, this research aims to deepen our understanding of the internal and external mechanisms that shape their social behavior. Such knowledge is essential not only for counselors, teachers, and program developers but also for families and policy makers striving to support the holistic development of gifted learners.

In doing so, the study acknowledges that withdrawal is not inherently negative but may reflect an adaptive response to a misaligned environment. As Sternberg (2024 #157361) argues, reframing emotional and social traits of the gifted requires a contextual understanding that avoids pathologizing behaviors that deviate from normative expectations. Rather than viewing withdrawal as a deficit, this research considers how it may reflect a meaningful response to unmet psychological needs. Therefore, the study does not aim to eliminate withdrawal behaviors altogether but to uncover their underlying dimensions, triggers, and consequences.

2. Methods and Materials

2.1. Study Design and Participants

This study employed a qualitative research design with an interpretive approach to explore the dimensions of social withdrawal in academically gifted youth. The research sought to understand the lived experiences and perceptions of these individuals within their academic and social environments. The participants included 27 academically gifted youths selected through purposive sampling from various educational institutions and enrichment programs across the United States. The inclusion criteria required participants to be identified as gifted through school or program assessments and to be between the ages of 12 and 18. The sample aimed for diversity in age, gender, and geographic location to ensure a broad representation of experiences. Data collection continued until theoretical saturation was achieved, where no new themes or dimensions emerged from additional interviews.

2.2. Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, which provided the flexibility to probe deeper into emerging themes while maintaining consistency in the main line of inquiry. The interview protocol was developed based on a review of the literature and included open-ended questions

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exploring participants' social experiences, peer interactions, emotional responses to social contexts, and their perceptions of isolation or withdrawal. Each interview lasted approximately 45 to 60 minutes and was conducted either in person or via secure video conferencing platforms, depending on participant availability and location. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and transcribed verbatim for analysis.

2.3. Data analysis

Data analysis followed a thematic content analysis approach using NVivo software to manage and code the qualitative data. The analysis involved multiple stages, beginning with open coding to identify initial concepts, followed by axial coding to group related codes into broader categories, and finally selective coding to develop overarching themes. Throughout the analysis process, constant comparison techniques were employed to refine categories and ensure internal consistency. The credibility of the findings was enhanced through member checking, peer debriefing, and maintaining an audit trail of decisions made during the coding and interpretation process. This rigorous analytical approach allowed for a detailed and nuanced understanding of the various dimensions of social withdrawal as experienced by academically gifted youth.

3. Findings and Results

The study sample consisted of 27 academically gifted youth, aged between 12 and 18 years, with a mean age of 15.1 years. Participants were recruited from various educational institutions and enrichment programs across the United States through purposive sampling, ensuring diversity in geographic location, gender, and academic background. Of the total participants, 14 identified as female, 12 as male, and one as non-binary. The group included individuals from both public and private school settings, as well as those enrolled in specialized gifted programs. Participants represented a range of cultural and ethnic backgrounds, including White (48%), Asian American (26%), African American (15%), and Hispanic or Latino (11%). All participants had been formally identified as gifted by their schools or psychological assessments and were fluent in English, enabling full participation in the semi-structured interviews.

Table 1

Themes, Subthemes, and Concepts Identified in the Study

Category (Theme)	Subcategory (Subtheme)	Concepts (Open Codes)
1. Emotional and Psychological Drivers	Fear of Rejection	Avoiding peer judgment, anticipating failure, fear of embarrassment, self-doubt
	Perfectionism Pressure	Fear of mistakes, constant self-monitoring, high self-imposed standards
	Social Anxiety	Physical discomfort in groups, overthinking interactions, emotional tension
	Low Self-Esteem	Negative self-talk, comparison with others, internalizing criticism
	Overthinking Social Interactions	Rumination, replaying conversations, worry about interpretation
	Need for Emotional Safety	Seeking solitude, fear of vulnerability, withdrawal as protection
2. Peer and Social Environment	Peer Mismatch	Lack of shared interests, communication difficulties, feeling misunderstood
	Bullying or Social Exclusion	Being ignored, targeted teasing, being labeled as "different"
	Lack of Trust in Peers	Reluctance to open up, fear of betrayal, seeing peers as insincere
	Group Dynamics Challenges	Feeling like an outsider, difficulty navigating group norms, social hierarchies
	Invisibility in Social Circles	Not being invited, feeling unnoticed, passive presence
3. Academic and Institutional Context	Academic Overload	Excessive homework, lack of free time, cognitive exhaustion
	Teacher Expectations	Pressure to always excel, being held to higher standards, limited tolerance for failure
	Lack of Social Skills Education	No training in peer communication, limited emotional support services
	Isolation in Gifted Programs	Segregation from general population, limited peer diversity, being labeled as elite
	Competitive School Culture	Constant comparison, performance-based identity, fear of underachievement
4. Coping and Withdrawal Strategies	Digital Escape	Excessive gaming, social media isolation, avoiding face-to-face contact
	Imaginary Companionship	Creating fantasy worlds, self-talk, anthropomorphizing objects
	Preference for Solitude	Enjoying alone time, choosing solo activities, avoiding group tasks
	Masking True Feelings	Pretending to be fine, hiding emotions, avoiding emotional disclosure
	Selective Socializing	Engaging only with trusted friends, avoiding new people, small social circle

	Academic Immersion as Avoidance	Studying to escape social pressure, obsessive focus on subjects, over-preparation
	Minimizing Presence	Avoiding eye contact, sitting at the back, silent participation

The analysis of interviews with academically gifted youth revealed four main categories: emotional and psychological drivers, peer and social environment, academic and institutional context, and coping and withdrawal strategies. Each of these categories included multiple subcategories that illuminate the complex and multidimensional nature of social withdrawal in this population.

Under the theme of emotional and psychological drivers, fear of rejection emerged as a prominent subcategory. Participants frequently expressed worry about being judged by others, anticipating failure in social situations, and fearing embarrassment. These fears led many to preemptively withdraw from potential interactions. One participant shared, “If I say the wrong thing, everyone’s going to think I’m weird, so I just don’t talk at all.” Such internalized expectations of negative outcomes contributed significantly to social avoidance.

Another key subcategory was perfectionism pressure. Many gifted youth reported holding themselves to exceptionally high standards and experienced intense anxiety about making mistakes. Their self-monitoring behavior extended into social interactions, where they feared not living up to their perceived intellectual identity. A 14-year-old participant stated, “I feel like I always have to be the smartest in the room, even when it comes to conversations. It’s exhausting.”

The subcategory of social anxiety was characterized by physiological and emotional discomfort in social settings. Participants described overthinking their words, feeling nervous in groups, and experiencing emotional tension before or after peer interactions. One adolescent commented, “Before I enter the classroom, my heart races, and I keep rehearsing what I might say if someone talks to me.”

Low self-esteem also contributed to social withdrawal. Participants described negative self-talk, frequent comparisons to others, and internalizing criticism from peers or authority figures. A participant said, “Even if someone gives me a compliment, I just think they’re lying or being polite. I never feel like I deserve it.”

Overthinking social interactions was a subcategory noted across multiple interviews. Gifted youth often replayed conversations in their minds, worried about how others interpreted their words, and found themselves ruminating on perceived mistakes. One participant explained, “I’ll go over a two-minute conversation for hours. I think about what I should’ve said differently, or if I sounded stupid.”

Lastly, in this theme, need for emotional safety was a driving force behind withdrawal. Many participants described withdrawal as a protective mechanism against emotional harm. As one adolescent put it, “Being alone feels safer. No one can hurt you if you don’t let them in.”

In the theme of peer and social environment, the subcategory peer mismatch captured the experience of being unable to relate to age-mates due to differences in interests or communication styles. Participants often felt misunderstood or disconnected. “I like talking about philosophy and science, but most kids just talk about TikTok or video games,” one participant noted.

Bullying or social exclusion was another powerful subcategory, with participants recounting instances of targeted teasing, being ignored, or labeled as different. One participant recounted, “They called me 'the robot' because I used big words. Eventually, I just stopped talking at lunch.”

A pervasive lack of trust in peers was also evident. Gifted youth often felt they couldn’t rely on classmates for emotional support and feared betrayal. “When I opened up once, someone spread it around. After that, I decided I’m better off keeping things to myself,” shared a participant.

The subcategory group dynamics challenges described struggles in navigating peer groups and social hierarchies. Participants reported feeling like outsiders and described difficulty blending in with established norms. “They all have their inside jokes and group chats. I just float around, never really belonging,” said one teen.

The feeling of invisibility in social circles was frequently mentioned. Participants felt overlooked or left out, even when present. One adolescent said, “I sit there and no one even looks at me. It’s like I’m invisible.”

The third theme, academic and institutional context, began with the subcategory academic overload. Gifted youth often described a heavy academic workload that left them mentally drained and with little time or energy for social engagement. “By the time I finish homework, I don’t even want to talk to anyone,” one participant remarked.

Teacher expectations added further stress. Participants felt they were held to higher standards than their peers and that mistakes were less tolerated. As one student stated,

"When I mess up, it's like, 'How could you make a mistake?' That just makes me stay quiet even more."

A lack of formal social skills education was also reported. Many students shared that while their academic needs were addressed, no one ever taught them how to navigate peer relationships. One participant said, "They gave me extra math but never helped me figure out how to talk to people."

The subcategory isolation in gifted programs described the experience of being separated from the general student body. This often led to reduced peer diversity and a feeling of social confinement. A participant explained, "We're always in our own room, with the same people. It's like being in a bubble no one else understands."

Lastly, competitive school culture contributed to social distance. Many participants reported that school environments prioritized performance over connection, fueling comparison and reducing collaboration. "It's not about friends—it's about being the best. That doesn't leave much room to just be yourself," said one youth.

The final theme, coping and withdrawal strategies, began with the subcategory digital escape. Participants frequently used digital media to retreat from stressful social environments. They reported excessive gaming, scrolling through social media, and avoiding face-to-face contact. "Online, I can control who I talk to. In real life, it's too unpredictable," noted a teen.

Imaginary companionship emerged as a creative coping mechanism. Some participants described creating fantasy worlds, engaging in self-talk, or attributing emotions to objects for comfort. One participant shared, "Sometimes I talk to my stuffed animals. They don't judge me."

Preference for solitude was also prevalent. Participants described genuinely enjoying alone time and choosing solo activities. As one stated, "I just like doing things alone. It's not always sad—I just feel more in control."

In the subcategory masking true feelings, participants reported hiding their emotional struggles behind a neutral or cheerful façade. "Everyone thinks I'm fine because I smile, but I'm just pretending," admitted one student.

Selective socializing referred to intentionally maintaining a very small, trusted group of friends, avoiding broader social interactions. "I only talk to two people. I trust them. That's enough," said one participant.

The subcategory academic immersion as avoidance revealed that many gifted youth turned to their studies not just for achievement but to escape uncomfortable social settings. "When I study, I don't have to deal with people. It's a good excuse to stay away," explained one teen.

Finally, minimizing presence described the subtle behaviors participants used to withdraw physically and socially from groups—such as avoiding eye contact, sitting in the back, or remaining silent in discussions. "I always sit near the exit. That way, if it gets too much, I can leave without anyone noticing," one youth shared.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

This study explored the dimensions of social withdrawal in academically gifted youth using a qualitative methodology grounded in semi-structured interviews with 27 participants from the United States. Four major thematic categories emerged from the data: emotional and psychological drivers, peer and social environment, academic and institutional context, and coping and withdrawal strategies. The findings highlight the complexity of social withdrawal among gifted adolescents, revealing that it is not a monolithic behavior but a multifaceted phenomenon rooted in both internal and external factors.

The first major theme—emotional and psychological drivers—revealed that fear of rejection, perfectionism, social anxiety, low self-esteem, and a need for emotional safety significantly contributed to participants' social withdrawal. These findings are consistent with previous studies that show gifted adolescents often internalize high expectations and fear social failure, which leads them to retreat from interpersonal situations (Ghasemi et al., 2023; Neihart et al., 2021). Emotional overexcitabilities, particularly in areas such as emotional sensitivity and self-awareness, make gifted individuals more vulnerable to psychological stress in social contexts (Pfeiffer, 2018). The perfectionism pressure expressed by participants aligns with findings by Albright and Montgomery (2023), who demonstrated that gifted adolescents often feel burdened by the need to maintain an idealized self-image, both academically and socially (Albright & Montgomery, 2023). These internal demands increase their social apprehension and amplify feelings of alienation, especially when they believe they cannot live up to expectations.

The theme of peer and social environment illustrated the role of external dynamics such as peer mismatch, bullying, and group exclusion in reinforcing social withdrawal. Many participants felt isolated due to a lack of shared interests with peers and described difficulty connecting with classmates who perceived them as "different" or "too smart." This is in line with Godor et al. (2020), who found that gifted students often experience social dissonance due to intellectual and

emotional asynchrony with their peer group (Godor et al., 2020). Such asynchrony frequently results in rejection, stereotyping, or marginalization—factors known to contribute to withdrawal behaviors. Similarly, Shcherbinina (2020) noted that gifted adolescents often struggle with personal identity formation within social environments that fail to validate their uniqueness (Shcherbinina, 2020). The sense of invisibility or hypervisibility experienced by participants mirrors the "double-edged sword" of giftedness in adolescence, where individuals may feel both overlooked and scrutinized.

Additionally, participants reported that social environments were often marked by low trust, exclusionary group dynamics, and limited access to supportive friendships. These findings corroborate the work of Peterson et al. (2021), who emphasized the importance of peer acceptance in shaping the emotional stability of gifted adolescents (Peterson et al., 2021). When such acceptance is absent, withdrawal becomes a logical—though maladaptive—coping mechanism. Göksu et al. (2024) further underscored the impact of peer relationships in either buffering or exacerbating emotional stress in gifted students, showing that insufficient peer bonding can intensify tendencies toward isolation (Göksu et al., 2024).

The third theme—academic and institutional context—highlighted systemic and structural contributors to social withdrawal. Participants commonly identified academic overload, elevated teacher expectations, and isolation within gifted programs as drivers of withdrawal. These findings support the research of Tatlılıoğlu (2023), who observed that institutional neglect of emotional development in gifted education creates imbalance and emotional disconnection in students (Tatlılıoğlu, 2023). Participants described being overwhelmed by school demands and noted that gifted programs often fostered competitiveness rather than collaboration. Such competitive environments reduce opportunities for genuine peer interaction and increase performance-related anxiety (Moreau et al., 2022). The lack of integrated social-emotional learning curricula for gifted students, as reported in this study, aligns with Darbani's (2023) argument that most gifted programs remain academically rigorous but emotionally under-resourced (Darbani, 2023).

The finding that institutional separation of gifted students can result in reduced social diversity and a limited sense of belonging echoes the conclusions of García et al. (2021), who advocated for more inclusive extracurricular programming to promote peer integration and emotional growth (García et al., 2021). Moreover, the misinterpretation of social withdrawal by teachers—as defiance or disengagement rather than distress—has also been noted in previous research. Krasa (2023) emphasized the need for teacher training to better identify and respond to communication difficulties and emotional withdrawal among gifted students (Krasa, 2023).

The final theme—coping and withdrawal strategies—exposed how gifted adolescents consciously or unconsciously manage their social withdrawal. Subcategories included digital escape, preference for solitude, masking emotions, selective socializing, and academic immersion. These findings point to withdrawal not simply as a symptom of dysfunction but also as a coping tool that offers perceived safety and autonomy. This perspective aligns with Sternberg's (2024) call to reframe social and emotional expressions in gifted youth, recognizing that behaviors such as solitude and emotional concealment may be protective strategies in unsupportive environments (Sternberg, 2024). Many participants used academic focus to justify withdrawal and avoid emotional exposure, an observation consistent with Larionova et al. (2021), who argued that gifted students often redirect their energy into academic domains to cope with social disconnection (Larionova et al., 2021).

Interestingly, the tendency to engage in selective socializing or retreat into digital platforms suggests a nuanced understanding of control among gifted adolescents. They do not necessarily lack social desire but rather seek contexts where they can safely express themselves. This distinction parallels findings by Urben et al. (2018), who showed that gifted adolescents demonstrate enhanced self-regulation when they perceive emotional safety, even in solitude (Urben et al., 2018). Similarly, Oğurlu et al. (2016) found that perceived social support, particularly from a small number of trusted individuals, significantly enhanced emotional resilience among gifted students, even when broader social engagement was limited (Oğurlu et al., 2016).

The cumulative evidence from this study and prior research suggests that social withdrawal among gifted adolescents is a product of both internal vulnerabilities and external pressures. While giftedness is often viewed as a protective factor, it can amplify sensitivity to rejection, perfectionism, and identity conflicts. Without adequate emotional education, institutional support, or inclusive peer environments, these vulnerabilities manifest as avoidance and isolation. At the same time, withdrawal may reflect strategic behavior—a way of asserting control and

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preserving authenticity in socially mismatched settings. This finding aligns with the resilience-based frameworks proposed in recent studies, which highlight the role of adaptive coping mechanisms in sustaining well-being among emotionally sensitive adolescents (Yağbasanlar & Балоглу, 2025; Yildirim & Çelikkol, 2024).

Despite the coherence of these findings with prior literature, this study contributes novel insights by exploring the subjective experiences behind withdrawal behaviors. While many studies rely on teacher ratings, clinical assessments, or quantitative surveys, the qualitative approach employed here reveals the internal reasoning, emotions, and self-protective strategies that underlie withdrawal. These insights can inform future interventions aimed at not simply reducing withdrawal but understanding its roots and meanings within the lived experiences of gifted adolescents.

5. Limitations & Suggestions

This study is not without limitations. First, the sample size, although sufficient for qualitative saturation, was limited to 27 participants from the United States, which may constrain the generalizability of findings to other cultural or educational contexts. Additionally, all participants were recruited through programs that had already identified them as gifted, potentially excluding students with gifted traits who remain unrecognized due to socio-economic or linguistic barriers. The reliance on self-reported data through interviews may also introduce recall bias or social desirability effects. Moreover, the study did not include longitudinal data, which would allow for the exploration of how withdrawal patterns evolve over time.

Future research should consider expanding this line of inquiry by including cross-cultural comparisons to determine how different educational systems and cultural attitudes toward giftedness shape social withdrawal. Longitudinal studies would be especially valuable in tracking how withdrawal patterns emerge, persist, or diminish across developmental stages. It would also be beneficial to incorporate mixed-method approaches that combine qualitative interviews with behavioral observations or teacher/parent assessments. Including the perspectives of educators and parents could provide a more comprehensive understanding of the ecological systems influencing withdrawal. Additionally, future studies might explore intersections of social withdrawal with gender identity, neurodiversity, or twice-exceptionality within the gifted population.

To address the issue of social withdrawal in gifted youth, educational institutions should integrate emotional intelligence and social skills training into gifted curricula. Teachers and counselors must be equipped with the tools to identify and interpret withdrawal behaviors as potential signs of unmet emotional needs. Schools should promote inclusive environments where intellectual diversity is normalized rather than stigmatized, and where collaboration is valued over competition. It is also essential to create structured opportunities for peer bonding across academic ability levels. Finally, interventions should be tailored to individual coping styles, recognizing that not all withdrawal is pathological but may reflect the adolescent's effort to achieve emotional balance.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants.

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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Authors' Contributions

All authors contributed equally.

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