




Small Acts of Resistance: Factors Underlying Youth Coping with Stereotype Threat in Schools

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Article Info

Article type:

Original Research

How to cite this article:

Abdulhussein, O., El Amrani, Y., & El-Sayed, M. (2025). Small Acts of Resistance: Factors Underlying Youth Coping with Stereotype Threat in Schools. *Journal of Adolescent and Youth Psychological Studies*, 6(8), 1-10.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.61838/kman.jayps.4431>



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ABSTRACT

Objective: The purpose of this study was to explore the coping mechanisms and everyday acts of resistance employed by South African adolescents in response to stereotype threat within school contexts.

Methods and Materials: This qualitative study utilized semi-structured interviews with 26 secondary school students aged 15–19 from diverse socio-economic and cultural backgrounds in South Africa. Participants were recruited purposively to ensure direct experience with stereotype threat in educational settings. Interviews, each lasting 45–60 minutes, were conducted until theoretical saturation was achieved. Data were transcribed verbatim and analyzed thematically using NVivo 14 software, with coding conducted in iterative stages of open, axial, and selective coding. Rigor was enhanced through independent coding, reflexive memoing, and maintaining an audit trail.

Findings: Analysis revealed four main themes: identity negotiation, resistance in everyday practices, coping with emotional impact, and negotiating power in school spaces. Under identity negotiation, youth reclaimed cultural pride, countered negative labels, and affirmed self-worth. Everyday resistance included humor, strategic silence, academic persistence, peer support, and symbolic acts. Emotional coping involved both adaptive strategies such as journaling, sports, and spirituality, as well as maladaptive responses like social withdrawal. Finally, participants described negotiating power by challenging authority, assuming leadership roles, invoking policy awareness, and creating safe spaces with allies. These findings illustrate that adolescents' responses to stereotype threat are multifaceted, ranging from subtle acts of defiance to collective strategies of resilience.

Conclusion: The study demonstrates that South African youth are not passive in the face of stereotype threat but actively resist and reframe their experiences through diverse coping mechanisms. These small acts of resistance preserve identity, foster belonging, and create pathways for empowerment in restrictive school environments. Recognizing and supporting these strategies has critical implications for educators, policymakers, and practitioners seeking to reduce the harmful effects of stereotypes in education.

Keywords: Stereotype threat; youth coping strategies; small acts of resistance; identity negotiation; South Africa; resilience; education.

1. Introduction

The school environment is a key developmental context in which young people construct their sense of self and social identity. Within this space, stereotypes—whether linked to race, gender, socio-economic background, or ability—can profoundly shape students' academic engagement, psychosocial well-being, and future trajectories. The concept of stereotype threat, broadly defined as the situational risk of confirming negative stereotypes about one's social group, has been extensively documented across different populations and contexts (Casad et al., 2017). For youth in schools, stereotype threat manifests in both subtle and overt ways, influencing achievement outcomes, participation patterns, and identity development.

Research demonstrates that stereotype threat significantly impairs academic performance by depleting cognitive resources and increasing anxiety. For example, African American and Latino elementary students tested together showed heightened vulnerability to stereotype threat, which negatively affected their test performance (Wasserberg, 2017). Similar findings have been reported in gendered contexts: girls confronted with stereotypes about mathematics underperformed when their mathematical anxiety was high, indicating the moderating role of emotional responses (Pérez-Garín et al., 2017). The phenomenon is not limited to mathematics or gender; in broader educational settings, stereotypes about learning disabilities also lead to poorer outcomes unless buffered by psychological disengagement (Zhao et al., 2019). These findings suggest that stereotype threat undermines performance across domains and populations, making it a pervasive challenge within educational institutions.

More recent work has expanded the focus of stereotype threat to additional contexts and identities. For instance, Wu and colleagues demonstrated that stereotype threat not only impedes academic functioning but also influences poverty-elimination dynamics among generationally poor individuals, highlighting long-term structural consequences (Wu et al., 2023). Similarly, studies show that stereotypes directed at boys in language arts and mathematics can disadvantage them academically, challenging the perception that stereotype threat only harms marginalized groups such as girls or racial minorities (Chaffee et al., 2023). Together, this evidence points to the need for nuanced approaches that consider multiple identity dimensions and academic subjects when analyzing the effects of stereotype threat.

Beyond academic performance, stereotype threat shapes identity development and perceptions of belonging. Research on biracial students has revealed that these youth often feel caught between categories, perceiving heightened threat and diminished belonging in both predominantly White and predominantly Black school contexts (Rozek & Gaither, 2020). Asian American adolescents also describe navigating the “model minority” stereotype, which creates pressure to conform to academic expectations while simultaneously erasing their individual differences (Rodriguez-Operana et al., 2017). For Asian students and their families, intergenerational expectations tied to cultural values further intersect with school-based experiences, revealing complex dynamics of conformity and resistance (Lee et al., 2024). These studies emphasize that stereotype threat is not only about performance outcomes but also about how students negotiate their identities in environments where stereotypes circulate.

Acts of resistance, ranging from subtle behaviors to overt challenges, emerge as important strategies in navigating these pressures. For instance, minority youth in the United States have been shown to use self-affirmation to protect their psychosocial health, thereby buffering against the negative consequences of stereotype threat (Perry et al., 2021). Similarly, religious and cultural anchors provide students with alternative frameworks for resilience. Cureton's study of Muslim refugee youth revealed that these young people construct positive civic identities in schools despite facing stereotypes and exclusion, often reframing their faith-based identity as a source of empowerment (Cureton & Aguinaldo, 2023). In European contexts, interventions such as the *Lights4Violence* project have used creative methods like cinema to foster positive relationships and resist harmful stereotypes in adolescent peer cultures (Neves et al., 2022). These examples underscore that young people are not passive recipients of stereotypes but actively engage in strategies to cope with and resist them.

Stereotype threat also carries significant emotional and psychological implications. Adolescents exposed to social threat cognitions often experience heightened anxiety, which can interfere with both their well-being and their academic engagement (Ryan et al., 2019). Latent transition analyses demonstrate that perceived threats influence emotional and behavioral development over time, suggesting that repeated exposure to stereotype threat can alter developmental trajectories (Conley et al., 2024). Furthermore, stereotype threat is not exclusive to educational settings; for instance, Coundouris and colleagues found that individuals with

Parkinson's disease experience stereotype threat that affects their psychological functioning, demonstrating the broader relevance of this phenomenon beyond youth populations (Coundouris et al., 2022).

Emotions such as stress and anger often emerge in response to racial stereotypes in schools. Fleming and colleagues applied RECAST theory to analyze racial stress appraisal in high schools, finding that differences in racial threat and available support significantly influenced students' experiences of stress (Fleming et al., 2024). These findings indicate that coping strategies must be understood in relation to available support systems and the appraisal of threat, further highlighting the role of everyday resistance in mitigating harm.

The persistence of stereotype threat cannot be separated from broader institutional structures. School disciplinary practices, for example, often disproportionately affect marginalized youth. Lehmann and Meldrum reported that suspension patterns varied across Hispanic and Caribbean subgroups, demonstrating how racial and ethnic identity intersects with gender to shape outcomes (Lehmann & Meldrum, 2022). Similarly, research on threat assessment in K-12 schools highlights the importance of institutional mechanisms in shaping whether youth feel supported or stigmatized (Cornell & Burnette, 2021). For incarcerated youth, stereotypes about criminality interact with institutional violence, further reinforcing cycles of marginalization (Young-Alfaro, 2019). These structural dimensions underscore that coping with stereotype threat cannot be reduced to individual-level strategies alone but must be situated within systemic inequities in educational and social institutions.

Stereotypes in competitive academic contexts, such as Olympiads, provide another lens for understanding systemic pressures. In Germany, stereotypes in physics Olympiads were found to create barriers for certain groups of students, though the extent of harm varied depending on context (Ladewig et al., 2022). Similarly, stereotypes in youth sport have been shown to influence participation and performance, suggesting that institutionalized expectations extend beyond classrooms into extracurricular domains (Cormack & Hand, 2020). These findings demonstrate that stereotype threat is embedded in multiple layers of school life, encompassing both curricular and extracurricular domains.

A growing body of literature highlights the importance of interventions and coping strategies in addressing stereotype threat. Self-affirmation interventions have been shown to improve well-being and academic outcomes among

marginalized student populations (Perry et al., 2021). Cultural frameworks such as Confucian values have served as buffers against stereotype threat in older adult populations, illustrating how deeply rooted cultural norms can foster resilience (Tan & Barber, 2018). Among youth, collective initiatives such as peer support networks and creative projects offer pathways for resisting stereotypes. The *Lights4Violence* project, for instance, demonstrated how cinema-based interventions helped youth develop skills for healthy relationships and resist negative social norms (Neves et al., 2022).

Students themselves often generate subtle but meaningful strategies of resistance. Research on gender stereotypes in education shows that boys and girls deploy different coping mechanisms depending on the subject domain and cultural context (Brussino & McBrien, 2022). Female students, in particular, may counteract stereotypes in mathematics through persistence and self-regulation, even while grappling with anxiety (Pérez-Garín et al., 2017). At the same time, differences in teacher stereotypes also matter. Stuckert and colleagues found that stereotypes about subgroups of pre-service teachers varied, suggesting that educators themselves are subject to the same cultural forces that shape students' experiences (Stuckert et al., 2021). These findings underscore the importance of addressing stereotypes at both student and teacher levels to create more equitable environments.

Despite the extensive literature on stereotype threat, relatively little is known about the everyday coping strategies and acts of resistance employed by youth in African contexts. Much of the existing research has focused on Western populations, leaving a gap in understanding how stereotype threat operates within South African schools, where racial, cultural, and socio-economic inequalities are historically entrenched. The present study aims to examine how South African youth respond to stereotype threat through small, everyday acts of resistance, building on existing literature while providing culturally grounded insights into coping strategies in education.

2. Methods and Materials

2.1. Study Design and Participants

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore the factors underlying youth coping with stereotype threat in schools. The focus was on capturing the lived experiences and subjective interpretations of adolescents navigating stigmatization and resistance in educational

settings. The study population consisted of secondary school students from diverse socio-economic and cultural backgrounds in South Africa. Purposive sampling was applied to ensure the inclusion of participants who had direct experiences with stereotype threat in their school environment. A total of 26 participants were recruited, representing a balance of gender, age ranges from 15 to 19 years, and varied educational trajectories. Recruitment was conducted through collaboration with school counselors and youth organizations, ensuring ethical considerations of consent and confidentiality were strictly observed.

2.2. Measures

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, which allowed for both consistency across participants and flexibility to probe deeper into unique individual perspectives. The interview guide included open-ended questions addressing students' awareness of stereotype threat, their emotional and cognitive responses, and the everyday coping strategies or small acts of resistance they employed in their school settings. Interviews were conducted in quiet and private spaces within schools or community centers to create a safe and comfortable environment for participants. Each interview lasted approximately 45 to 60 minutes and was audio-recorded with participants' consent. Data collection continued until theoretical saturation was reached, meaning that no new themes or insights were emerging from additional interviews.

2.3. Data Analysis

The audio recordings were transcribed verbatim and imported into NVivo 14 software for systematic analysis. A thematic analysis approach was employed, guided by

iterative coding and constant comparison. The analysis began with open coding, in which raw data segments were labeled to capture initial concepts. This was followed by axial coding to identify relationships and linkages between categories, and finally selective coding to refine and consolidate overarching themes. To enhance trustworthiness, coding was independently reviewed by two researchers, with discrepancies resolved through discussion until consensus was reached. Reflexive memos and audit trails were maintained throughout the analysis process to ensure transparency and rigor. The final set of themes captured the nuanced coping strategies and subtle forms of resistance that South African youth mobilized in response to stereotype threat in their schools.

3. Findings and Results

The study included 26 participants drawn from secondary schools across South Africa. Participants ranged in age from 15 to 19 years, with the majority falling between 16 and 17 years ($n = 15$). In terms of gender distribution, there were 14 females and 12 males, reflecting a relatively balanced representation. Participants came from diverse socio-economic backgrounds, with 10 reporting residence in urban townships, 9 from peri-urban areas, and 7 from rural communities. Ethnically, the sample included IsiZulu ($n = 8$), IsiXhosa ($n = 7$), Sesotho ($n = 5$), and other groups including Setswana and Afrikaans-speaking youth ($n = 6$). Approximately 18 participants identified as first-generation learners within their families, while 8 had siblings or parents who had previously completed secondary or tertiary education. This demographic variation allowed for capturing a wide range of perspectives on stereotype threat and coping strategies within the South African school context.

Table 1

Thematic Analysis

Category (Main Theme)	Subcategory (Subtheme)	Concepts (Open Codes)
1. Identity Negotiation	Reclaiming Cultural Pride	Wearing traditional attire; Speaking indigenous languages; Sharing cultural stories; Challenging negative media images
	Countering Negative Labels	Rejecting stereotypes verbally; Redefining labels positively; Humor as resistance; Peer affirmation
	Concealing Vulnerability	Withholding emotions; Avoiding stereotype conversations; Downplaying stress
	Affirming Self-Worth	Self-talk; Setting personal goals; Emphasizing talents beyond academics
	Role Modeling	Looking up to community leaders; Emulating resilient peers; Mentoring younger students
2. Resistance in Everyday Practices	Managing Belonging	Balancing peer groups; Shifting accents; Adjusting clothing styles
	Strategic Silence	Refusing to respond to provocations; Ignoring derogatory comments; Silent protest during class

3. Coping with Emotional Impact	Humor and Irony	Making jokes about stereotypes; Sarcasm to expose bias; Bonding through shared laughter
	Academic Persistence	Studying harder; Seeking extra tutoring; Excelling in exams to counter stereotypes
	Peer Support Networks	Sharing experiences with friends; Creating solidarity groups; Encouraging classmates
	Non-Compliance	Deliberate rule-bending; Challenging unfair teacher instructions; Refusing biased tasks
	Symbolic Acts	Wearing resistance symbols; Using graffiti/notes; Expressive hairstyles
	Alternative Expression	Music/rap lyrics; Poetry writing; Dance performances addressing stereotypes
	Emotional Regulation	Deep breathing; Journaling emotions; Channeling frustration into sports
	Seeking Adult Allies	Talking with teachers; Guidance counselor sessions; Support from parents
	Spiritual/Religious Anchors	Prayer; Attending church/mosque; Faith-based resilience
	Internalizing Stress	Withdrawing socially; Self-blame; Feeling isolated
4. Negotiating Power in School Spaces	Building Optimism	Visualizing future success; Reframing negative events; Daily gratitude
	Challenging Authority	Questioning teachers' remarks; Confronting unfair grading; Publicly disagreeing
	Classroom Participation Strategies	Speaking up selectively; Avoiding spotlight; Preparing responses in advance
	Leadership Roles	Taking part in student councils; Leading group projects; Organizing events
	Policy Awareness	Learning about school rules; Invoking student rights; Reporting discrimination
	Creating Safe Spaces	Forming cultural clubs; Designating safe hangouts; Peer mentoring spaces
	Collaboration with Allies	Partnering with progressive teachers; Aligning with NGOs; Engaging with senior students

Category 1: Identity Negotiation

Reclaiming Cultural Pride.

Many participants described reclaiming their cultural identity as a strategy for resisting stereotype threat. This often involved embracing indigenous languages, wearing traditional attire, and sharing cultural heritage within school spaces. One participant reflected: *"When I wear my beads and speak isiZulu at school, I feel like I'm showing them I am proud, no matter what they think"* (Participant 7). Such acts functioned both as personal affirmation and as subtle resistance to homogenizing school norms.

Countering Negative Labels.

Students also developed strategies to resist negative labeling. Some rejected stereotypes outright, while others reframed derogatory terms into sources of pride. Humor was often used to undermine the sting of such labels. For example, a participant recalled: *"When they call me lazy, I just laugh and say, yeah, lazy but still getting higher marks than you"* (Participant 13). These counter-narratives empowered students to detach from the stigma of stereotypes.

Concealing Vulnerability.

A number of youth responded by concealing their emotional struggles. They avoided discussing stereotypes with peers or downplayed the stress caused by bias. One student explained: *"If you show them it hurts, they win. So I just keep quiet, even when it gets heavy inside"* (Participant 2). Concealment provided short-term protection, though it often came at the cost of internalizing distress.

Affirming Self-Worth.

Participants emphasized personal achievements and inner strength to affirm their value. They often engaged in self-talk, goal setting, and highlighting talents beyond academics. A participant stated: *"When I feel like they expect me to fail, I remind myself I am good at sports and art too, and that gives me strength"* (Participant 11). This broadened sense of identity reduced the weight of academic stereotypes.

Role Modeling.

Looking to resilient peers, community leaders, or acting as mentors themselves, some students engaged in role modeling as a coping mechanism. *"I want to show my little brother that we don't have to believe those things teachers say about us"* (Participant 19). For these youth, resistance extended beyond self-preservation toward inspiring others.

Managing Belonging.

Students frequently described navigating multiple peer groups and adjusting their self-presentation to manage belonging. Some shifted accents or clothing styles to avoid stigma. As one put it: *"Sometimes I sound more 'white' in class, just so they don't say I'm dumb. It's like switching masks"* (Participant 23). This strategic adaptation revealed the ongoing negotiation of identity in peer and school interactions.

Category 2: Resistance in Everyday Practices

Strategic Silence.

Silence was used as a deliberate form of resistance. Students reported ignoring derogatory remarks or choosing not to engage in confrontations. One participant noted: *"I don't give them the satisfaction. I just act like I didn't hear"*

it” (Participant 6). In this way, silence became an act of control rather than passivity.

Humor and Irony.

Humor emerged as a powerful coping device, turning tension into solidarity. Shared laughter often transformed experiences of bias into moments of connection. *“We joke about the stereotypes in our group. It makes us feel strong, like we’re in on something they don’t get”* (Participant 15). Such irony disrupted the seriousness of prejudice.

Academic Persistence.

For many, excelling academically was itself an act of defiance. Students committed to extra study and tutoring as ways of proving stereotypes wrong. *“They expect us to drop out, so I study harder. Every time I pass, I feel like I’m pushing back”* (Participant 5). Achievement became both personal resilience and symbolic resistance.

Peer Support Networks.

Informal solidarity networks provided crucial protection. Students supported one another emotionally, encouraged perseverance, and validated shared experiences of bias. One participant described: *“When I feel like the teachers look down on me, I talk to my friends and they remind me I’m not alone”* (Participant 9). Such networks buffered against isolation.

Non-Compliance.

Deliberate rule-bending and refusal to obey biased instructions were also evident. Students resisted by refusing tasks they deemed unfair. *“If a teacher tells me only the ‘smart’ kids should lead, I don’t follow. I’d rather show them I can lead my own way”* (Participant 18). Acts of non-compliance challenged authority within constrained limits.

Symbolic Acts.

Some expressed defiance through subtle symbols—graffiti, hairstyles, or accessories signaling resistance. *“We put slogans on our books, like ‘Not your stereotype.’ Teachers don’t always see it, but we know”* (Participant 12). Such symbolic acts created hidden forms of expression within restrictive environments.

Alternative Expression.

Creative outlets such as music, poetry, and dance became channels for processing and expressing resistance. *“In my rap lyrics I talk about how they think we can’t succeed. On stage, I feel free”* (Participant 21). These alternative forms of expression allowed youth to transform pain into art and community.

Category 3: Coping with Emotional Impact Emotional Regulation.

Students described strategies such as deep breathing, journaling, or engaging in sports to manage stress. *“When I feel angry about the things they say, I go play soccer until I’m calm again”* (Participant 10). Regulation enabled them to release frustration in constructive ways.

Seeking Adult Allies.

Some found support in trusted teachers, counselors, or parents. *“My English teacher listens when I talk about how unfair it feels. She says she believes in me, and that helps”* (Participant 8). Adult allies provided affirmation and guidance, reinforcing resilience.

Spiritual/Religious Anchors.

Faith practices were central for several participants, who found strength in prayer and spiritual communities. *“When I pray, I remember that God made me strong, not weak”* (Participant 16). Spiritual anchors offered meaning beyond the immediate school environment.

Internalizing Stress.

Not all strategies were adaptive. Some students withdrew socially, blamed themselves, or felt isolated. *“I stopped hanging out with friends. It’s easier not to be around people who think less of you”* (Participant 1). These accounts highlight the costs of stereotype threat when coping resources are limited.

Building Optimism.

Others consciously fostered hope for the future. Visualizing success and reframing challenges were common. *“I tell myself, high school is just a stage. One day I’ll prove them wrong at university”* (Participant 20). Optimism helped maintain motivation amid negative experiences.

Category 4: Negotiating Power in School Spaces Challenging Authority.

Several participants directly confronted teachers or questioned unfair grading. *“When my teacher said boys from my area can’t focus, I raised my hand and asked her why she thinks that”* (Participant 14). Such boldness disrupted classroom power dynamics.

Classroom Participation Strategies.

Some students adopted cautious approaches—speaking up selectively or preparing answers in advance to avoid ridicule. *“I only answer when I’m sure I’m right, so they can’t laugh at me”* (Participant 22). These strategies minimized exposure to bias while maintaining engagement.

Leadership Roles.

Engaging in student councils, leading projects, or organizing events offered platforms to demonstrate capability. *“When I became head of our debate team, people*

stopped doubting me as much" (Participant 25). Leadership roles were powerful tools for reshaping perceptions.

Policy Awareness.

Learning about school rules and student rights empowered youth to respond to discrimination. *"I told the teacher the code of conduct says no favoritism. That made him think twice"* (Participant 3). Knowledge of institutional frameworks strengthened their agency.

Creating Safe Spaces.

Youth formed cultural clubs, peer mentoring groups, and designated safe hangouts. *"In our study group, no one judges you. We remind each other we're capable"* (Participant 17). These spaces offered collective resistance to negative stereotypes.

Collaboration with Allies.

Some sought partnerships with progressive teachers, NGOs, or older students. *"We worked with a youth NGO to hold a workshop about discrimination. It felt like we were doing something real"* (Participant 24). Alliances extended resistance beyond the individual to community collaboration.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of this study highlight the multifaceted ways South African youth resist, cope with, and navigate stereotype threat in schools. Through strategies such as reclaiming cultural pride, developing peer support networks, humor, symbolic expression, self-affirmation, and policy awareness, adolescents enacted subtle yet meaningful forms of resilience. These small acts of resistance, although often understated, demonstrate agency in environments saturated with deficit-oriented expectations. The discussion situates these findings within the broader scholarly literature on stereotype threat, identity development, and coping mechanisms.

One of the central themes in this study was identity negotiation, particularly through reclaiming cultural pride and affirming self-worth. Participants reported wearing traditional attire, speaking indigenous languages, and framing cultural practices as sources of strength. This finding resonates with prior scholarship showing that minority adolescents actively resist harmful stereotypes by drawing on cultural resources. Research on Asian families, for example, emphasizes how intergenerational values and traditions sustain students' sense of belonging in educational contexts (Lee et al., 2024). Similarly, Muslim refugee youth have been found to reinterpret faith-based identities as a

source of empowerment in schools that often marginalize them (Cureton & Aguinaldo, 2023). These parallels suggest that cultural and religious identity anchors are vital not only for sustaining self-worth but also for transforming stereotype threat into opportunities for resilience.

The role of self-affirmation further underscores this point. Participants used positive self-talk and highlighted non-academic talents to resist being defined solely by stereotypes. Such practices align with intervention research showing that self-affirmation can buffer marginalized groups against the psychological harms of stereotype threat. For instance, a study of medical students demonstrated that affirming core values improved psychosocial well-being across racial groups (Perry et al., 2021). Similarly, among older adults, Confucian values have functioned as a cultural buffer against age-based stereotype threat, illustrating the universal applicability of culturally grounded self-affirmation strategies (Tan & Barber, 2018).

Youth in this study employed everyday practices of resistance ranging from humor and silence to symbolic acts and academic persistence. These strategies reflect subtle forms of agency that disrupt negative stereotypes while avoiding overt conflict. Humor, in particular, was widely reported as a mechanism for undermining the sting of bias and fostering peer solidarity. This finding echoes research on European youth in the *Lights4Violence* project, which demonstrated that creative and relational strategies—including humor—were effective tools for resisting harmful peer norms and stereotypes (Neves et al., 2022).

Strategic silence, though less visible, functioned as another powerful form of control. By refusing to respond to derogatory remarks, participants asserted autonomy over their emotional responses. This strategy can be interpreted alongside findings from research on biracial adolescents, who often manage belonging by strategically engaging or disengaging in social contexts to minimize exposure to threat (Rozek & Gaither, 2020). Resistance through silence thus becomes a context-dependent tool for preserving dignity.

Academic persistence was another consistent theme. Many participants described studying harder and excelling in exams as deliberate acts of resistance. This reflects prior findings that marginalized youth often respond to stereotypes by striving to prove them wrong. Studies have shown, for example, that stereotype threat effects among girls in mathematics can be counteracted by perseverance, particularly when students reframe anxiety as motivation (Casad et al., 2017; Pérez-Garín et al., 2017). In this way,

persistence serves as both a coping strategy and a symbolic rejection of deficit expectations.

The study also revealed diverse emotional coping mechanisms. Youth reported managing stress through sports, journaling, and spirituality, while others internalized stress by withdrawing socially. This diversity reflects the complex emotional landscape created by stereotype threat. Previous research confirms that stereotype threat is emotionally taxing, increasing anxiety and impairing well-being (Ryan et al., 2019). Longitudinal analyses further indicate that perceived threats can alter developmental trajectories, shaping emotional and behavioral outcomes over time (Conley et al., 2024).

Spirituality emerged as a particularly important anchor for participants, offering meaning and resilience in the face of stigmatization. This aligns with findings among refugee and migrant youth, who often turn to faith as both a coping resource and a framework for civic engagement (Cureton & Aguinaldo, 2023). Emotional regulation strategies such as reframing and optimism similarly mirror evidence that supportive frameworks, whether cultural or psychological, can mitigate the harms of stereotype threat (Fleming et al., 2024). However, the reports of internalized stress also highlight the dangers of maladaptive coping, which, as studies of incarcerated youth demonstrate, can exacerbate cycles of marginalization when not addressed by supportive interventions (Young-Alfaro, 2019).

A notable dimension of resistance in this study was the negotiation of power within schools. Youth actively challenged authority, participated in student leadership, and became familiar with institutional policies to protect themselves from discriminatory practices. These findings echo literature on racial and ethnic identity in school discipline, which demonstrates that suspension rates vary by subgroup and reflect systemic inequities (Lehmann & Meldrum, 2022). By invoking school rules or organizing peer groups, participants in this study directly contested the structural reproduction of stereotypes.

Leadership roles and collaboration with allies also emerged as critical mechanisms for empowerment. Prior research shows that institutional structures, such as threat assessment systems, can either reinforce or alleviate stereotype-based harms depending on how they are implemented (Cornell & Burnette, 2021). Similarly, interventions in youth sport contexts have demonstrated that stereotypes not only shape participation but also create opportunities for resilience when young people assume leadership roles and challenge expectations (Cormack &

Hand, 2020). Thus, students' active engagement in leadership positions in this study represents a broader pattern of youth transforming school structures from within.

The coping and resistance strategies documented here reflect a global pattern of youth responding to stereotype threat in context-specific ways. Gendered stereotypes in education, as documented across multiple cultural contexts, reveal that both boys and girls experience disadvantage depending on the domain (Brussino & McBrien, 2022; Chaffee et al., 2023). Similarly, stereotypes in competitive academic spaces, such as the German Physics Olympiad, create barriers for underrepresented students, though some participants manage to resist these expectations through perseverance and self-belief (Ladewig et al., 2022). The current study extends these insights by demonstrating how South African youth employ small, contextually grounded acts of resistance that often go unnoticed but are central to identity preservation and academic engagement.

Importantly, the findings also reveal that stereotype threat is not monolithic. Instead, its effects are mediated by cultural anchors, peer support, institutional structures, and individual agency. This resonates with Wu's work on stereotype threat and poverty dynamics, which underscores the intersection of structural inequalities with individual psychological processes (Wu et al., 2023). Similarly, the diversity of coping strategies in this study mirrors Stuckert's observation that stereotypes themselves vary across groups of educators, suggesting that resistance strategies must be understood in relation to the specific stereotypes at play (Stuckert et al., 2021).

Taken together, these findings contribute to a more nuanced understanding of stereotype threat by centering youth voices and highlighting the importance of subtle, everyday acts of resistance. They demonstrate that while stereotypes remain pervasive and harmful, young people are not passive victims but active negotiators of their identities, emotions, and institutional environments.

5. Limitations & Suggestions

This study has several limitations that must be acknowledged. First, the sample size, though sufficient for qualitative saturation, was limited to 26 participants from specific schools in South Africa. This restricts the generalizability of the findings to broader populations. Second, the reliance on self-reported data through interviews may have introduced recall bias or social desirability bias, as participants may have downplayed maladaptive coping

strategies or emphasized resilience. Third, while the study captured a range of coping strategies, it did not systematically measure their effectiveness or long-term outcomes, leaving open questions about which strategies are most protective against stereotype threat in different contexts. Finally, the positionality of the researchers, including their cultural backgrounds and interpretations, may have influenced data collection and analysis despite efforts at reflexivity and triangulation.

Future studies should expand the demographic and cultural scope of research on stereotype threat and resistance. Comparative studies across African countries, as well as between Global South and Global North contexts, would provide valuable insights into how socio-historical conditions shape coping strategies. Longitudinal research is also needed to track the long-term effectiveness of resistance strategies on academic and psychosocial outcomes. Moreover, future work should integrate mixed-methods approaches, combining qualitative depth with quantitative measures of stress, achievement, and well-being to provide a holistic understanding. Finally, research could examine the role of educators and institutional policies in shaping the spaces where resistance emerges, exploring interventions that empower both students and teachers to disrupt stereotype threat together.

Practitioners and educators should recognize and validate the small acts of resistance that youth employ as legitimate coping strategies. Schools can foster inclusive environments by integrating cultural pride, peer support, and leadership opportunities into curricula and extracurricular activities. Training for teachers should include awareness of how subtle stereotypes operate and how students may resist them in ways that are not immediately visible. Creating safe spaces within schools where students can share experiences, affirm identities, and access supportive adults is equally vital. Finally, interventions should not only focus on mitigating stereotype threat but also on amplifying the agency and resilience of youth, ensuring that their everyday acts of resistance are nurtured rather than suppressed.

Acknowledgments

We would like to express our appreciation and gratitude to all those who cooperated in carrying out this study.

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.

Funding

This research was carried out independently with personal funding and without the financial support of any governmental or private institution or organization.

Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this article.

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