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Experiences of Indian Emerging Adults with Visual Impairment

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Emerging Adulthood and Visual Impairment

Emerging adulthood is a crucial development period between the age of 18 to 29, where individuals explore their identities, focus on themselves, and experience a sense of optimism for their future (Arnett, 2000). This period is also a time of instability and feeling in between, which is often exacerbated by their culture, socioeconomic status and background (Arnett, 2000). Emerging adults with visual impairment not only have to go through the challenges of the developmental period but also the added challenges from the lack of access and social structures to support their disability.

India with its developing economy and changing sociocultural landscape, the country still lacks structural accommodations to support the large visually impaired population (D'Souza, 2020). The present studies explore the psychosocial issues experienced by emerging adults with visual impairment, through their self and societal perception. It further explores visual impairment through the lens of the social model of disability and tries to understand the lived experience of the participants who navigate through structural and cultural barriers in India.

Study: Design and Procedure

The aim of this exploratory study is to understand the experiences of emerging adults with visual impairment in Urban India and will be used to investigate their psychosocial development within the context of the culture. A total five participants interviewed, the range of age was between 23 to 29 years old, $\mu=26.$, $SD=2.15.$ The following research questions were investigated:

- 1) What are the psychosocial issues faced by Indian Emerging Adults with visual impairment?
- 2) Understanding the life experiences of emerging adults with severe visual impairment or blindness.
- 3) How do emerging adults with visual impairment perceive themselves?

Interviews were semi structured and approximately an hour long. Participants were asked questions pertaining to their life, experiences as a visually impaired person living in India, the differences and the similarities between them and people with sight, the perception that society has of them and their response to such perceptions. They were analyzed through an iterative and reflexive process called thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The method is used to identify patterned meaning across the interviews, this will clarify similarities and differences across participants within the cultural context of India.

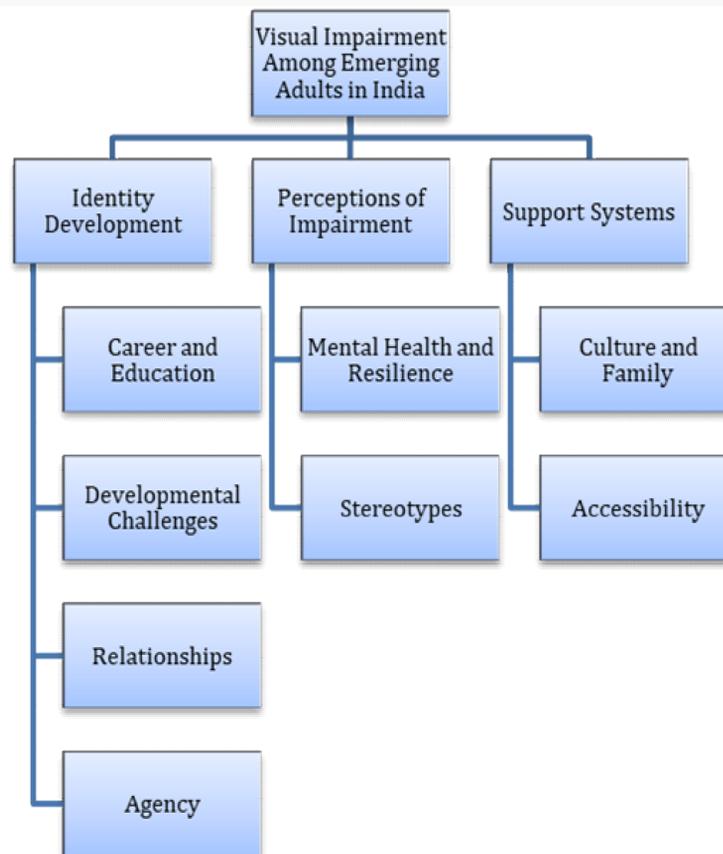


Fig 1: Thematic Map of Experiences of Emerging Adults with Visual Impairment

Findings: Thematic Analysis

Three major themes that have emerged and will be further explored in this section are identity development, support systems, and perceptions.

Identity Development: Identity development encompasses codes that help us understand how emerging adults with visual impairment navigate and build their sense of self. The areas that emerging adults explore are relationships, self, and career, these aspects were highlighted through the subthemes. However, due to their visual impairment, participants in this study faced additional challenges that prevented them from exploring this stage of life completely. This is evident in many of the interviews where there is a sense of resignation about their condition and their lack of opportunities.

Support Systems: This theme portrays the various ways emerging adults with visual impairment are supported in their community. This included emotional support from their family, practical supports in the form of increase accessibility.

Another aspect that came up a lot was the effect of India's collectivist culture on the support systems, a lot of the participants talked about wherever they went there would always be people wanting to help them. This was opposite to the inaccessible infrastructure of the country. Those who participant went to regular schools said that teachers were not trained to teach them, and exams were in formats that were inaccessible to them.

Perceptions of Impairment: This theme encompasses the view of blindness in society that often leads to the emergence of stereotypes such as visually impaired people being invalid or a superhero. These perceptions and stereotypes also affect the mental health of individuals and thus force them to build resilience. One participant shared an experience where someone was surprised that they as a blind person was able to use technology and then asked them an intrusive question about how they eat, brush their teeth and other mundane things. These types of interactions brought a sense of frustration and internalized feelings of incompetency among other participants as well.

Conclusion and Future Directions

Societal perceptions of blindness and their ability has an impact on the identities of visually impaired people. Further, the exploration that is synonymous with emerging adults in limited due to accessibility and perceptions that prevent visually impaired people from forming meaningful relationships. The most important relationships in their life were often with their family members which further leads to societal isolation. Moreover, constant help from pedestrians and strangers made people feel less confident in their abilities and made them feel unequal in society. However, regardless of these challenges, all the participants were advocates and agentive in their own lives and wanted to improve the lives of blind people in the country. Limitations of this study include having a small sample size, participants only being from urban areas and highly educated. Thus, future directions include having a more diverse pool of participants and including the voices of sighted people who interacted and cared for the visually impaired and those who have not. This provides an exploratory lens that will lead to further investigation and implantation of policies surrounding the visually impaired community.

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