

Sexuality Awareness and its Impact on Personal Development: Thematic Analysis of Perspectives of Indian Young Adults

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Abstract

Exploring one's sexual identity is a vital part of self-development and identity formation. Young adults, socially, legally, and developmentally, are actively in the phase of strengthening their core identity, with sexual identity being a major component. Ideas related to sexuality and sexual orientation are often either repressed or normatively imposed. This study aimed to explore awareness and understanding of sexuality among young adults and to understand the impact of these perspectives on personal development. For this purpose, 30 young adults between 18 and 25 years were interviewed, and their responses were analysed using thematic analysis. Analysis succinctly brought up six major themes supported by key quotes from the responses. This thematic analysis provides valuable insights into the complex landscape of sex education and sexual identity among young adults, emphasizing the need for comprehensive and inclusive educational strategies, supportive environments, and open discussions to foster a better understanding and acceptance of diverse sexual identities. It underscores the influence of societal norms and the critical role of social media and peer support in shaping young adults' understanding and acceptance of sexual diversity. Future research should continue to explore these themes to inform policies and educational practices that promote sexual health and well-being, with a particular focus on addressing gender norms and providing mental health support.

Keywords: Sexuality awareness, sexual health, reproductive health, young adults, thematic analysis

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Exploring one's sexual identity is a vital part of self-development and identity formation. Sex education's basic premise begins with the awareness and acknowledgement of one's sexuality and sexual orientation. There is a growing recognition of this aspect among young people, though it remains inadequate and unacceptable in various social contexts of the individual still being an unpopular discourse. The dangers of inadequate information may lead to risky behaviours within this sphere that contribute to almost half of the sexually-aided diseases. (Srivastava, Winn, Senese & Goldbach, 2022). Misinformation or eclipsed awareness downright assumes challenges in terms of vulnerability to dangerous sexual behaviour – unprotected sex, non-consensual sexual interactions, early marriages, unplanned pregnancies, sexual abuse, and so on (Ramdugu, 2011; Kushwah & Mittal, 2007).

In this study, the conceptualisation of sexuality and sexual orientation is explored among young adults to be able to capture the associated beliefs and how sex-positive conversations may have an impact on personal development. A precursor to the concept of sexuality and sexual orientation is to know the distinction between sex and gender. Sex is the anatomical structure one is born with—expressed biologically. Gender is an extended socially constructed term and refers to an individual's expression of their psychological characteristics and behaviour which is either aligned or misaligned with the assigned sex. Gender includes more than just female and male, which is intersex, transgender, gender fluid, gender queer etc. To bring in personal harmony, many opt to align sex and gender through surgical and biomedical interventions (Natu, 2021).

Being aware and expressing one's sexuality and sexual orientation is a part of a normal development pattern. Learning and exploring one's sexual orientation is not a one-time event, it is a gradual process, and the experience is unique to each individual and their

personal development. Sexuality and sexual orientation are related terms that make life meaningful in the context of personal development. Sexuality may be understood as the expression of thoughts, patterns, and feelings related to physical or sexual attraction towards “other”, not limited to procreation. Whereas sexual orientation is a predominant pattern of who one is attracted to sexually, romantically and emotionally; in other words, it is the sexual identity one holds. There are various types of sexual orientations, and they are influenced by personal, cultural, and social factors (APA, 2022). The broad types of sexual orientation include heterosexuals, people who are attracted to the opposite gender, and homosexuals. Homosexuals can further be divided into two categories - gay; to describe men who are attracted to the same sex and lesbian; to describe women who are attracted to the same sex. Bisexual, another kind of sexual orientation, is the term used for individuals who are attracted to both genders. Queer: an umbrella term used for describing people who are not heterosexual, however, are still questioning their identity and do not wish to label themselves. There is also recognition for individuals who lack sexual attraction and show less or no sexual activity, known as asexual. Pansexual is the term used to refer to individuals who pose sexual, romantic or emotional attraction to a person regardless of their sex or their gender identity. The acronym used to refer to different types of sexual orientations excluding heterosexuals is called LGBTQ+. Sexuality, hence, may be understood as a holistic term used to define how one feels sexually and the sexual preferences or behaviours that one holds. One’s sexuality can be fluid, i.e., it can change over time or in different situations, and it is subjective (Katz-Wise, 2015).

The stigma and social taboo surrounding the conversations about the expressions of sexuality suppress the need to address sexual health as a matter of concern and, consequently, the reproductive health of adults, which is an encouraged goal of the National Family Health Survey- 6 by the Ministry of Family Health and Welfare (National Family Health Survey,

n.d.). Suppressing one's sexual identity, feelings, and emotions can lead to psychological distress and mental health issues (Hatzenbuehler, 2009; Pachankis, 2007), as also supported by the minority stress model (Meyer, 2003). When individuals suppress themselves due to societal norms or expectations, it can also cause internal conflict and a sense of alienation (Herek, G. M., & Garnets, 2007). Long-term suppression may lead to a buildup of unresolved psychological issues, potentially resulting in more severe mental health conditions like chronic anxiety or depression (Rosario et al., 2006). It can also impact interpersonal relationships and overall quality of life (Frost & Meyer, 2009). The pressure to conform and suppress authentic feelings, such as homophobia in young men, can result in a distorted self-image and low self-esteem, contributing to feelings of inadequacy and emotional difficulties (Pascoe, 2013). Young people should be given a role in articulating, designing, implementing and evaluating programmes that need innovation and acceptance. Thus, the research question for this paper is to explore the cognition of young people and based on the narratives roll out a core set of promising actions that protect the rights of youth in this context.

Method

Objective of the study

The objectives of the study were derived from the major research questions— How do young adults perceive sexuality, and how does this perception impact aspects of personal development?

Young adults, socially, legally, and developmentally, are actively in the phase of strengthening their core identity—a major component being sexual identity. Ideas related to sexuality and sexual orientation are either repressed or normatively imposed. It is of research interest to examine this major idea through the following objective:

- To explore awareness and understanding of sexuality among young adults
- To understand the impact of the aspects of these sexuality perspectives on personal development

Procedure

For this research, 30 young adult respondents, i.e., people between the age range of 18-25 years were recruited based on convenience from the regions of Hyderabad and Andhra Pradesh, India. The other demographic details were not requested from the sample to protect the respondents' identities because of the interview's stigma and sensitivity. Once the potential respondent was approached, informed consent was obtained. The objective of the research study was explained to the potential respondent and their rights to withdraw from the process at any time needed, and confidentiality of the interviews was assured. Semi-structured interviews were conducted using a pre-set guide of questions. The interviews were audio recorded.

The collected data were analysed using thematic analysis (TA) (Braun & Clarke, 2012). The interviews were first converted into text verbatim. Sub-themes were identified across the responses, which were labelled to bring out the dominant narratives (themes) regarding sexuality amongst the study participants. This captured the essence of each theme more succinctly and clearly.

Results

These aim to capture the essence of each theme more succinctly and clearly. The following themes were identified:

Theme 1: Clinical and detached, female-specific sex education

Participants reported having limited sex education from proper sources such as schools and homes, with discussions often confined to menstruation, good touch-bad touch, sexual assault, and contraceptives. Education was often clinical and detached, and menstruation education was restricted to girls. Sexuality was often presumed as heterosexual.

Key Quotes: “No one ever spoke about sex in my house before, but during this vacation that we had, my sister sat me down and discussed contraceptives with me.”

“I think almost everyone had this experience. The education regarding periods; They would separate, at least in my case. They would split the boys and girls and send them to the auditorium. They educated us about periods and how we should always be safe. But they also asked us not to tell the boys.”

Theme 2: Terminological confusion about sexuality and orientation

Many participants confused the terms 'sexuality' and 'sexual orientation,' using them interchangeably and showing limited understanding beyond the identities of 'gay' and 'lesbian.'

Key Quotes: “Why are you asking me the difference between them, do they not mean the same?”

“Why are you taking it to be two different words? I thought that they were one.”

Theme 3: Mine and others—Owning of sexual identity

Participants reported that they had explored their sexual identities and orientations. They showed high acceptance of others' identities, expressing willingness to support and help them. Some participants were aware of their sexualities and orientations but were open to further exploration, often using terms like "for now" to describe their current orientation.

Key Quotes: “I support people with different sexuality and sexual orientations, but if you ask about mine, I’m straight and do not wish to discover it.”

“Not much. I’ve only been interested in girls. So, like, I have a lot of gay and bisexual friends, I don’t like boys. I have a lot of boys and friends like them, but I don’t like boys in a romantic way.”

Theme 4: Fear of disclosure and rejection from significant others

Few participants were not very open to discussing their sexuality and orientation publicly, preferring to confine these discussions to close friends. Fear of judgment and lack of understanding from parents or the older generation were significant barriers.

Key Quotes: “ I did not mention my sexual orientation to anyone for a very long period until I met a few friends like me over social media, who are like me and accept me for who I am.”

- “I won’t talk about it. Maybe at max to my partner, but not to anyone else.”

Theme 5: Impact on personal development

Participants emphasized the need to increase awareness and normalize discussions about sexuality and orientation for personal development and self-confidence.

Key Quotes: “To reach an ideal case scenario where discussions aren’t needed, we need to have a lot more discussions on them so that talking about them becomes quite common and normal. It will make us feel normal.”

“Yes. I think there is a need to discuss about this, like, at the present certain scenario because there is so much of misinformation out there. Mhmm. And for you to not get into that or for you to get what the right information, you need to have And, also, because of the taboos we have around us, we need to come out of it.”

Theme 6: Positive influence of social media

Participants identified the internet, social media, and their social surroundings as major influences on their understanding and acceptance of sexuality and sexual orientation.

Key Quotes: “It is the social media that has influenced this change in me, especially talking to different people on the internet. Social media does have its ups and downs but, in my case, it was a huge help, because it helped me change my beliefs completely and I became more of an open-minded person. It also helped me accept myself for who I was.”

“I got my own phone and when I, got Instagram and social media, that is when I realized that this exists. But when I got to know this new information, I couldn’t share this with any of my friends because they were against it or my parents because it is still a taboo.”

Discussion

The study brought to light several significant themes addressing the research objective, providing a nuanced understanding of young adults' perceptions regarding sexuality and sexual orientation. It is crucial to acknowledge the participant sample's skewness, predominantly comprising individuals who identified as women, which may influence the findings' generalizability. Each theme highlights unique challenges and perspectives that underscore the need for more comprehensive and inclusive educational approaches.

The findings indicate that sex education remains a highly stigmatized and limited aspect of the participants' upbringing. The clinical and detached way sex education is often delivered, coupled with gender-specific teachings about menstruation, suggests that a holistic approach to sex education is lacking (Ketting & Ivanova, 2018). This supports previous research indicating that comprehensive sex education is essential for fostering a healthy

understanding of sexual health and relationships (Kirby, 2008). The lack of comprehensive sex education necessitates exploring alternative avenues for providing accurate and inclusive information to young adults. Consequently, many participants turned to the internet, social media, and peers for information. While social media provides easy access to diverse perspectives and facilitates self-acceptance, it may also lead to misinformation and echo chambers, underscoring the need for critical media literacy education (Ward, 2016). Future interventions should aim to integrate more open and inclusive discussions that go beyond basic topics to encompass a broader range of sexual health issues.

Participants consistently recognized that heterosexuality is perceived as "more normal" than other identities and orientations. This perception is deeply rooted in societal norms that dictate that men should be masculine and attracted only to females, reinforcing heteronormativity and the gender binary. These norms perpetuate homophobia, stigmatizing and marginalizing deviations from heterosexuality. The findings align with existing literature on the impact of patriarchal structures on the acceptance of diverse sexual orientations (Connell, 2005; Pascoe, 2013).

The terms 'sexuality' and 'sexual orientation,' were often conflated, showing limited understanding of the distinctions. Despite this confusion, there was awareness of different sexual orientations, primarily straight, lesbian, gay, and bisexual. This suggests a need for clearer definitions and distinctions in sex education curricula and public discourse. Without any proper understanding of these concepts, individuals might struggle to navigate their identities and relationships. This theme aligns with the findings by Russell et al. (2010), which stress the importance of clear and precise educational content regarding sexual identity.

Despite the terminological confusion, participants generally exhibited accepting attitudes towards diverse sexual orientations. Many expressed willingness to support friends or family members who came out as queer, reflecting a shift towards greater inclusivity and tolerance, particularly among younger generations (Pew Research Center, 2017). The terms 'proud' and 'happy' were commonly used to describe their reactions towards their close ones, highlighting a supportive attitude. However, the reluctance to label one's orientation and the use of terms like "for now" indicate a transitional understanding of sexual identity. This fluidity is in accord with contemporary theories of sexual identity development which emphasize its dynamic nature (Diamond, 2008). Encouraging this openness while providing supportive environments is crucial for healthy identity development.

Participants believed in spreading awareness about sexuality and sexual orientation to foster a more accepting society. However, they were reluctant to discuss their sexuality or orientation beyond trusted peers, particularly avoiding conversations with parents or in public. This reluctance suggests lingering stigma and discomfort, especially within familial or intergenerational contexts. The willingness to explore one's sexuality was more evident among women, highlighting broader societal norms around masculinity and heteronormativity, which may restrict men from exploring non-conventional sexualities (Connell, 1995). Fear of judgment and lack of understanding from parents or the elder generation were significant barriers to open discussion. This finding aligns with *Meyer's (2003) minority stress model*, which suggests that fear of stigma and discrimination leads to the concealment of an individual's sexual identity. Another interesting highlight of the above pretext is the patriarchal expectations of male stoicism and the emotional restraint contributing to men's reluctance to explore their sexuality and orientation. The dynamics of masculinity and homophobia within peer cultures, leading to fear of bullying, further restrict this exploration (Pascoe, 2013).

The significant role of social media and social networks in shaping participants' beliefs and acceptance of sexuality underscores the powerful influence of these platforms. Social media is a double-edged sword, offering both supportive communities and the potential for misinformation (DeAndrea et al., 2012). Leveraging the positive aspects of social media, such as peer support and information sharing, while mitigating negative influences through digital literacy education, could enhance its beneficial impact on sexual identity development. Participants identified the internet, social media, and their social surroundings as major influences on their understanding and acceptance of sexuality and sexual orientation.

Conclusion

This thematic analysis provides valuable insights into the complex landscape of sex education and sexual identity among young adults. The findings emphasize the need for comprehensive and inclusive educational strategies, supportive environments, and open discussions to foster a better understanding and acceptance of diverse sexual identities. It underscores the influence of societal norms and the critical role of social media and peer support in shaping young adults' understanding and acceptance of sexual diversity. Future research should continue to explore these themes to inform policies and educational practices that promote sexual health and well-being, with a particular focus on addressing gender norms and providing mental health support.

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