

## Who Am I? - A Qualitative Approach to Identity Exploration among Female Undergraduate Students

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### **Abstract:**

The search for identity is central during adolescence. This research aims to qualitatively explore the challenges faced by female undergraduate students. A non-probability purposive sample of eight participants was chosen. A semi-structured interview schedule validated by two experts posed qualitative, open-ended questions about the adolescent's experiences. The interview was video-taped and transcribed verbatim by the researcher. Data collected was analysed in a thematic fashion within the parameters of the interpretative phenomenological approach. Three global themes emerged, which provide a guiding post for planning future interventions for the management of identity search among this age group.

Defining oneself is central to one's development throughout one's lifetime. Adolescence is a period during which the first step towards this critical self-discovery is taken.

The adolescent's state of being has been described in the fifth stage of Erikson's psychosocial stages - Identity vs. Identity confusion, quoted as 'between the morality learned by the child, and the ethics to be developed by the adult.' Ego identity crystallizes, providing the adolescent with an integrated sense of self, thereby avoiding an identity crisis. The successful resolution of this stage will help subsequent stages of development and contribute to a stable foundation for core belief systems, in relation to the self and the outer world.

This qualitative enquiry aimed to explore the typical challenges faced by female adolescents. The broad research question being exploration of identity, a semi-structured interview schedule was employed to pose open-ended questions about their experiences with themselves, their families, peers, and community. Before conducting the semi-structured interview, the researcher developed a list of issues that are likely to be important to this age group. This was used to generate a guide of questions and prompts for the research.

## Method

A non-probability purposive sample was chosen wherein female undergraduate students having sufficiently different educational backgrounds, family units, and social group memberships were identified. Permission was requested from the authorities to interview the students. Data was collected using qualitative, open-ended evaluative questions. All eight participants consented to participate in the study, and were aware that the interview was being recorded and transcribed. The online interview began with an explanation about the purpose of the research and an assurance of confidentiality.

The following open-ended questions for the interview schedule were formulated by the researcher and ratified by two experts - a student counsellor and an academician, both working closely with the student population.

Research Area: Identity in female adolescents

Research Question: How is identity defined by female adolescents?

Objectives: To determine the definition of identity among female adolescents

Specific objectives: To identify and understand their subjective experience of identity

Domain areas: Thoughts about identity

1. Question: What do you honestly think of yourself? Describe yourself to me.  
Follow-up question: How do you feel society contributes to this description of yourself?
2. Question: What is your favourite picture of yourself? Why?  
Follow-up question: Are you alone in this picture? Who else is a part of this picture?
3. Question: Describe the areas you would like to enhance about yourself. What is one key thing that you would like to change when you describe yourself? Tell me why.
4. Question: Are there any resources that you can tap to make your identity more meaningful? Please describe them.  
Follow-up question: How and where would you acquire those resources?
5. Question: Has the lack of social engagement during the lockdown played a role in your experiences of identity search? What are the ways in which it has impacted you?  
Follow-up question: How did you cope with the physical absence of your peers?
6. Question: Can you please elaborate on parental expectations that you face?  
Follow-up question: Who are you most close to in your family?

7. Vignette: Youngsters usually spend time in sports activities, college clubs, social media platforms, or friends' groups. Can you tell me which of them you engage yourself with?

Follow-up question: Please elaborate on the groups you tend to spend time with.

8. Question: What genre of music do you like to listen to?

9. Question: Who would you say is your role model? Why?

Follow-up question: Describe the qualities that you admire in your role model.

Research area: To explore the role of peer influence in identity

Research question: What are the steps taken to handle identity confusion?

Objectives: The reasons for female adolescents' identity confusion

Specific objectives: To explore role of peer influence on identity

Domain areas: Female adolescents' identity confusions

1. Question: What do you feel is preventing you from asserting your identity or your independence? Have you asked anyone for help? If so, what happened?
2. Vignette: Mary studies in a prestigious college which has a cosmopolitan crowd. She is close to her group of friends who motivate themselves and their friends towards academic goals and personal achievements. On the other hand, there is another group which is popular. This group tends to be in the limelight for its rebellious opinions. Though Mary feels close to her friends, this other group tempts her to push her boundaries to explore her unfamiliar aspects of her personality. What would you do if you were in Mary's situation? Would you take steps to fit in the popular group? Give reasons for your response.

Objectives: To understand the interplay of persistent behaviours and self-discipline in fostering identities among female adolescents

Specific objectives : To identify the steps taken to explore oneself

Domain areas : Thoughts about self-awareness and future aspirations

1. Question: How do you see yourself after college graduation? Please use your imagination to describe it to me.

Follow-up question: How will you know you have developed an identity for yourself?

2. Question: What is the one thing that you have done and are not proud of doing? Why?

Follow-up question: How do you see yourself after doing that thing?

3. Question: How do you plan to motivate yourself when obstacles arise?

Follow-up question: What are some ways to motivate yourself to get started in the desired direction? Could you describe them for me?

**Sample**

The researcher chose a sample based on a pre-decided criterion

Inclusion criteria: Participants included in the sample were in the age range of 18 to 20 years, having sufficient proficiency in the English language, with video-conferencing options.

Exclusion criteria: Participants were excluded if they had a history of being on medication for any physical or psychiatric illness. Also, married participants were excluded.

**Table 1:** Characteristics of the Sample

Participant	Age	Family unit	No. of sibling	Group membership
P1	19 years	nuclear	1	NCC & Fusion Dance Club
P2	18 years	nuclear	1	None
P3	20 years	nuclear	1	L&D club and Entrepreneur Cell
P4	20 years	nuclear	1	Hindi Club & NCC
P5	20 years	nuclear	1	NSS
P6	20 years	nuclear	None	Senate Member
P7	20 years	nuclear	1	Senate member & NSS Club
P8	20 years	nuclear	1	NSS & Quiz club

**Data Analysis and Interpretation**

The social constructivist paradigm following the phenomenological approach, guided the interpretation of data in the present study. The life experiences of female adolescents would vary as they would be experienced differently by others.

The data collected was subjected to thematic analysis to examine and summarize the participants’ responses, highlighting similarities and differences.

Initial codes were generated from the data:

Sr. No.	Emerging Codes	Summary of a Few Responses of the Participants
1	Self-description	Productive, all-rounder, but feel useless sometimes
2	Societal contribution	Parents and friends played a role
3	Favourite photograph	Solo photographs in traditional dresses
4	Areas of improvement	Need self-confidence, expressiveness, and listening skills
5	Steps taken for enhancement	Webinars, meditation, self-help strategies, internships
6	Disengagement during lockdown	Overthinking: do not talk to new people
7	Physical absence of friends	Video calls, texting, meeting during the relaxation of lockdown
8	Parental expectations	Ranged from lenient to pressurizing for career goals
9	Closest family member	Mostly mother; some preferred sibling and father
10	Group memberships	Reported happy times with friends; new avenues
11	Music preferences	Ranged from melodious to catchy music; some preferred music recommended by friends
12	Role model	Ranged from parents to IPS officers to sportsmen
13	Assertion of independence	Felt parents provided independence, but resented societal constraints
14	Peer influence	Most preferred to be their own person
15	Plans after graduation	Ranging from further studies, getting jobs, and applying for competitive exams
16	Not-so-proud moments	Ignoring good advice, yelling at parents, being harsh to others, betraying oneself
17	Self-motivational strategies	Introspection, social comparison, seeking opinions of parents and friends, and resoluteness

Photography can be viewed as a mode of expression for young female adolescents. Describing their favourite photograph, all respondents have opted for ones in which they are posing alone, either during birthdays or festivals. This can be linked to identity construction in adolescence (Sebastian, C. et al 2008), underlining the importance they give to themselves and how they perceive themselves.

Music can be considered helpful in defining social identity for oneself and for others. Social factors play a role in adolescents' preference for music (Rentfrow & Gosling, 2003), yet most respondents emphasized that their music preferences depended solely on their mood and preference.

Role models play a vital role in developing adolescents' identity. They can be people the youth may know or do not know, and may be famous or not famous. What they all have in common is that their choice of role models has inspired them to look beyond their limitations and help with goal setting. The respondents who preferred parents as role models admitted that they are inspired by how they deal with daily life situations and challenges. Hence, role models inspire the youth to build their identities.

Adolescents may face emotion regulation difficulties. Peers are their key psychological resources for maintaining positive group memberships and identities. They confessed that the pandemic had left them relying on their families for psychological and emotional needs during the lockdown periods. Some related better to siblings as newly found confidantes during the lockdown.

In sum, as given in Table 2, all the participants placed emphasis on personal development, specifically on honing their interpersonal communication skills. Yet they were unable to pinpoint any specific task-oriented strategies that could be used for enhancing their expressive skills.

The emerging codes, as seen in table two, can be clubbed together to form three major themes.

### **I. Emerging self and its influencers.**

The participants had an affinity towards their family members. Though it is assumed that young people tend to be stuck to their electronic gadgets, their responses revealed that they tried to use them judiciously. They preferred face-to-face bonding with their family members under the same roof.

*I spend most the time with my mom (P6)*

*I am used to sharing everything with my sister (P1)*

*My brother is more like a friend and I can relate to him (P3)*

*My dad knows everything, even my best friend's secrets (P7)*

Further, a few participants even look upon their parents as their role models.

*My parents...both of them work selflessly for their family (P6)*

*My dad...without any background he has come up (P4)*

*My mom is the breadwinner for our family...I look up to her braveness (P1)*

All except one participant reported having close affinities towards their friends. They look upon their friendships as sources of joy, in whose company they can be themselves. Though friends are a source of motivation and inspiration for them, they want to strongly hold their own in the face of probable peer influences.

Vignettes make participants respond truly and freely. Putting themselves into the situation given in the vignette, about a young college-going girl getting tempted to join a rule-defying popular group, most participants preferred to be their own person. Some admitted that the popularity of the group would tempt them, yet they preferred to be themselves rather than change their personalities just to “fit in”.

## II. Needs for interpersonal communication competence

All participants mentioned that their communication skills needed upgrading. They were under the impression that exposure to college life and multifarious people would sharpen their interactional abilities.

*I want to improve in expressing my feelings to people who care about me (P7)*

*I want to learn to communicate in English in better ways (P1)*

Despite being acutely aware of their lack of communication skills, they had no clear action plan to address this. The participants admitted that they needed to mingle with new people to gain exposure and expand their circle, yet they admitted to turning into reticent individuals post-lockdown.

*We moved in this new house in February and in March the pandemic started. But even till now, even after going out, I have no friends in the society. I don't talk to anyone new. I just sit with my books and my sister. I am just not the same person (P4)*

*I have become more silent now. Talking to people becomes even more tough (P6)*

*It's the pandemic which has made me an overthinking person (P8)*

### Persistent behaviors towards challenges

All participants acknowledged their parental efforts to provide for their families. This can be partly attributed to the Indian culture, which places one's parents on a pedestal. Yet the young female adolescent respondents have a strong desire to assert their independence in the outside world. They seemed both excited and nervous about this upcoming autonomy, whether in the world of work or future education.

*I am really confused. I want to do academics and music both (P3)*

*My plan is to pursue Post Graduation in a college and do UPSC training too (P5)*

*I want to take up the financial responsibility of my family (P4)*

*I will be a working woman...I just want to be independent and happy (P7)*

### Discussion

The growing adolescents are in an identity cluster consisting of nationality, age, sex, group memberships, and family type. How the female adolescent represents herself in her own eyes is as important as how she is represented in society, by large. Hence, the first theme that has arisen is ***Emerging self and its influencers***. Erikson (1968) stressed that identity formation is the central focus during the

adolescent stage, and adolescents are likely to be influenced by others in their environment. Yancey et al (2002) found that adolescents with an identifiable role model scored higher grades, had higher self-esteem, and stronger ethnic identity than those who lacked role models. These effects are stronger if the adolescent personally knew their role models.

The second theme ***Needs for interpersonal communication competence*** suggests that growing adolescents need to develop communicative skills as well as self-regulation. In a bid to develop their individuality, the adolescents may alienate themselves from social groups (Newman & Newman, 2001). Yet adolescents need close relationships to develop rather than psychological distance (Josselson, 1994). For an integrated identity, strong relationships with family and friends are necessary (Stringer, 1997; Chickering & Reisser, 1993). As reported in the current study, though adolescents seek supportive relationships in a group environment, their interpersonal communication skills need to be honed. Need for self-regulation emerged as another aspect that needed to be enhanced. Adolescents need to use self-regulation to set goals for academic purposes as well as monitor and control their cognition, motivation, and behaviour (Conover & Daiute, 2017). The qualitative interviews revealed that the adolescents struggled with self-regulatory strategies, whether to manage their own behaviour or their reactions of frustration, anger, and embarrassment.

The third theme that emerged is ***Persistency behaviours towards challenges***. Troy and Mauss (2011) found that adolescents exhibit resilience even when exposed to high stress levels. Deficits in emotional regulation and insecure attachments might make adolescents vulnerable to stress (Hankin & Abela, 2005). Positive youth development interventions done on young people have resulted in significant effects on their psychological adjustment, reduction in emotional distress, and improvements in self-perception (Ciocanel et al, 2017). Intervention strategies imparted by their own peers might have an even more impactful and far-reaching effect on the female adolescents.

Keeping in mind the global themes of the current qualitative study, the interplay of resilience, self-regulation, and social intelligence in the identity development of female adolescents can be examined by further research. The variables – resilience, self-regulation, and social intelligence have theoretical underpinnings. Self-regulation is one of the key areas that make up a person's social intelligence. Resilience is a product of self-mastery, thus linking it to self-regulation. The ability to self-regulate behaviour is one of the most important protective factors in relation to resilience (Artuch-Garde, R et al 2017). Together, all these variables can help the young adolescents respond appropriately to their social environment.

Resilience research reported that social support and personal mastery promote adaptation during stressful situations (Langdon, 1997). Usually, resilience interventions are developed for those who have undergone catastrophic events, yet a sense of control and connectedness is essential even for emerging youth to fully raise themselves to meet future trials.

Qualitative research has provided useful insights in designing intervention programs in the past. A report prepared by the Social Program Evaluation Group (SPEG), Queen's University, and The Students Commission of Canada, Centre of Excellence for Youth Engagement (2014) analysed the critical factors that support youth in the age group of 12 to 25 years. They created a youth thriving model after identifying consistent and frequently recurring factors. Autonomy, relatedness, and competence were the critical factors that were found and included in their interventions. As adolescents change and develop, they need to develop the skills and competencies to maintain quality relationships as well. Observation and imitation of their contemporaries helps them to learn interpersonal skills and appropriate situational behaviours (Hansen D. J. et al 1992).

### **Conclusion**

In the current study, the qualitative approach to identity exploration led to the emergence of three themes, namely emerging self and its influencers, needs for interpersonal communication competence, and persistent behaviours towards challenges.

### **Implications**

Peer-based interventions to bolster identity in female adolescents can be planned, keeping in mind the variables that emerged. A tenet of social learning theory is that individuals are more likely to focus on models who they perceive as being like themselves (Bandura & Walters, 1963). Youth might be more inclined to select role models who share their gender (Zirkel, 2002). Peers might not be looked upon as role models by the adolescents, but sharing the same gender might be beneficial. Hence, it is recommended that dyads belonging to the same gender be included in peer-based intervention programmes.

### **Limitations**

The current study was confined to an urban set-up. Including participants from the rural and urban areas from a larger cross-sectional sample could help in better understanding of the dynamics of identity formation.

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