The Relationship between Identity Formation and Age of Young Adults in India

ABSTRACT

A vast majority of research on identity formation focuses on societal and environmental factors. However, there has been less research on the age factor in identity formation. There are various dimensions of the identity we form for ourselves ranging from achievement, moratorium, foreclosure, diffusion and achievement- moratorium cycle. This study uses quantitative data collected by a survey form based on the Modified Marcia Questionnaire to understand the formation of such identities in individuals of ages 18-24. The results of this study highlights the age factor in identity formation in young adults. A major chunk of the population of young adults have reached the dimension of achievement, and many are at the level of achievement moratorium cycle.

Keywords: Identity formation, young adults, Achievement, moratorium.

INTRODUCTION

In today's changing world, identity formation remains an important task for young adults as they gain more independence and face social pressures. They often start questioning their values, beliefs, goals, and the roles they play in different parts of life such as school, family, or work. Identity refers to an individual's understanding of who they are, encompassing values, beliefs, goals, and roles in various domains of life. According to Erikson (1968), establishing a coherent identity is an important part of adolescence and young adulthood, where individuals resolve the tension between identity and role confusion to achieve psychological well being. He emphasised that this period is a period of confusion and experiments regarding identity and one's life path. He talks of a psychological moratorium where teens put on hold to committing to an identity while they explore other options.

A more detailed framework for understanding identity development was offered by James Marcia (1966), who expanded on Erikson's theory by introducing four identity statuses. Identity achievement describes individuals who have explored a range of options and made firm commitments to personal values, career paths, and beliefs, and is linked with higher self-esteem and clarity. Moratorium refers to those actively exploring identity alternatives without yet committing; this phase is often filled with uncertainty and psychological tension but is a critical stage in eventual identity resolution. In contrast, foreclosure involves strong commitments made without adequate exploration, often reflecting values inherited from authority figures or tradition, which may hinder future adaptability. Lastly, identity diffusion characterizes individuals who neither explore nor commit meaningfully, often resulting in fragmented or unstable self-concepts and increased emotional distress (Schwartz, 2001). These statuses illustrate that identity development is a dynamic and individual process, shaped by both internal drives and contextual influences.

Identity during young adulthood is shaped by a mix of personal and social influences such as family values, peer relationships, cultural background, education, and social expectations. Today, digital

media adds a new aspect, offering spaces for self expression but also exposing young people to comparison, pressure, and confusion. At the same time, gender roles, financial realities, and access to education can either expand or restrict identity choices. Because of this, identity development isn't just personal, it's deeply shaped by context. Every young person's journey is unique, unfolding at the intersection of self exploration and the world they live in.

Studying identity formation in young adulthood matters because it shapes so much of a person's future for example, how they feel about themselves, the choices they make, and how they relate to others. This stage of life, usually between 18 and 25, is a time of growing independence and big transitions. As young people move away from roles set by family or school, they begin to make more personal, self-directed choices (Arnett, 2000). They explore what they believe in, who they want to be with, and what kind of work they want to do. These explorations make identity development one of the most important psychological tasks. By understanding what supports or challenges identity development during these years, researchers and professionals can help young adults build a clearer, more meaningful sense of who they are, something that will guide them well beyond their twenties.

The aim of this study is to analyse the identity formation of young adults in India and understand on what level they fall in Marcia's identity stages according to their age.

RATIONALE

Identity formation is one of the most significant psychological and social processes that individuals undergo during young adulthood. This phase of life, often marked by the transition from adolescence to early adulthood, is a critical period where individuals explore, question, and shape who they are in terms of values, beliefs, career goals, cultural background, gender roles, and personal identity.

In today's world, young adults face a complex mix of influences—ranging from social media and peer pressure to educational expectations and shifting cultural norms. These influences can both support and challenge their process of self-discovery. With the rise of digital spaces and increased global connectivity, young people are exposed to diverse identities and ideologies, which often adds to their internal conflict or accelerates their personal growth.

Our interest in this topic stems from the fact that identity formation is not just a personal journey—it is deeply social and cultural. Understanding how young adults form their identities can help educators, parents, mental health professionals, and policy-makers to better support them in making informed, healthy, and empowering choices.

By focusing on this area, our research aims to explore the various dimensions focusing on how identity formation in young adults is influenced at this age such as family background, social context, peer relationships, digital influence, and cultural narratives—that shape identity development. We also aim to highlight the struggles young adults often face, such as identity confusion, pressure to conform, emotional uncertainty and also to understand how age and factors which an individual faces at this age influences identity formation.

Ultimately, this study hopes to contribute to a better understanding of how identity is formed, negotiated, and expressed among young adults today—and why this process is so vital for their overall well-being and future growth.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

1. Sánchez-Queija, I., & Sánchez-Queija, A. (2024). Identity development and adjustment during emerging adulthood from a gender perspective.

This study confirmed the Spanish version of the Dimensions of Identity Development Scale (DIDS) and looked at how identity processes connect to well-being in emerging adults, focusing on gender differences. The researchers guessed that identity dimensions would predict psychological adjustment and that these connections would differ by gender. The results showed that men had higher scores in commitment, while women scored higher in exploration and ruminative thinking. Identity commitment had a stronger positive effect on well-being for men than for women.

2. Mungo, A., Delhaye, M., Blondiau, C., & Hein, M. (2024). Identity formation in individuals between 16 and 25 years old with borderline personality disorder.

This clinical study looked at identity development in young adults with borderline personality disorder (BPD). Researchers expected to find problems with identity formation. The results showed that individuals with BPD had significantly lower identity synthesis and higher identity confusion compared to their peers. The study emphasizes how BPD interrupts important identity development during adolescence and young adulthood.

3. Longitudinal Associations among Identity Processes and Mental Health in Young Adulthood

Using a Canadian sample of young adults, this study tracked how identity exploration, both in breadth and depth, relates to mental health, with social support acting as a mediator. The researchers thought that broader exploration would reduce symptoms, while deeper, ruminative exploration could raise them. The results revealed that broader exploration was connected to fewer depressive symptoms. In contrast, deeper exploration predicted higher levels of anxiety and depression, partly influenced by perceived support from close relationships.

4. Jeon, H., et al. (2025). Letters from Future Self: Augmenting the letter-exchange exercise with LLM-based agents to enhance young adults

This study tested whether AI-generated "future-self" letters could improve career identity in young adults. The researchers believed that AI-based exercises would improve engagement and career clarity. While AI tools did increase participant engagement, they did not significantly perform better than traditional self-writing in improving future orientation or career self-concept.

5. The Role of Identity Exploration and Commitment in Predicting Well-being in Emerging Adults by Luyckx, K., Goossens, L., & Soenens, B. (2006)

This study examines how identity development processes-specifically exploration and commitment-are associated with psychological well-being in young adults. The researchers hypothesized that higher levels of identity commitment, combined with active exploration, would predict greater life satisfaction and lower depressive symptoms. Conducted on 425 university students aged 18-25, participants completed measures of identity styles, commitment, exploration, and psychological adjustment. Regression analyses revealed that identity commitment was a significant predictor of

well-being, while ruminative exploration correlated with increased anxiety and depressive symptoms. The study emphasizes the dual role of exploration-adaptive when future-oriented but maladaptive when excessive or obsessive. This research is crucial to understanding identity formation, as it highlights how balancing commitment with thoughtful exploration enhances psychological well-being in young adults.

6. Emerging Adulthood: A Theory of Development from the Late Teens through the Twenties by Jeffrey Jensen Arnett (2000)

This paper introduces the concept of 'emerging adulthood' as a distinct developmental period characterized by identity exploration, instability, self-focus, and a feeling of being in-between adolescence and adulthood. Based on qualitative interviews and surveys with individuals aged 18-25 across diverse socioeconomic backgrounds, the study proposes that emerging adulthood is a time for experimenting with various life possibilities, including work, love, and worldviews. Arnett argues that identity formation in this period is prolonged due to societal changes like delayed marriage and extended education. This theoretical framework is foundational for research on young adults' identity development, as it contextualizes the psychosocial dynamics of identity exploration in modern societies, providing a comprehensive lens through which the variability in identity trajectories can be understood.

7. The Influence of Social Media on Identity Development in Adolescents and Young Adults by Michikyan, M., Subrahmanyam, K., & Dennis, J. (2014)

This study investigates how online self-presentation affects identity processes among adolescents and emerging adults. The study hypothesized that greater authenticity in online profiles would correlate with stronger identity clarity and self-esteem. A sample of 216 college students (ages 18-22) completed surveys on their social media use, identity clarity, and self-perception. Results indicated that individuals who curated authentic self-presentations online reported higher identity clarity and lower levels of self-concept confusion. Conversely, those who engaged in exaggerated or idealized portrayals exhibited more identity-related distress. This research is particularly relevant in the digital age, illustrating how virtual platforms serve as spaces for identity exploration and experimentation, significantly impacting the development of coherent and stable identities among young adults.

8. Parental and Peer Influences on Identity Formation in Emerging Adulthood by Crocetti, E., Rubini, M., & Meeus, W. (2008)

This study explores the impact of parental and peer relationships on the identity formation process. The study hypothesized that supportive parenting and quality peer relationships would facilitate identity commitment and reduce identity confusion. A longitudinal sample of 357 adolescents transitioning into emerging adulthood (ages 17-21) was assessed using identity status interviews and relationship quality scales. Findings revealed that parental support predicted greater identity commitment over time, while peer relationship quality was linked to ongoing identity exploration and reconsideration. The study underscores the critical role of relational contexts in shaping identity trajectories, emphasizing that identity formation is not an isolated process but deeply embedded in social interactions. These findings are essential to understanding how familial and peer influences contribute to identity coherence in young adults.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This section discusses the sampling, data collection method, and data analysis protocol that were used to examine the impact of social media on identity formation of young adults.

Sampling Strategy

The target population of the research was people of 18-25 years of age who have reached a said milestone in their careers.
Sampling method: A random sampling approach was used to ensure sampling representation in terms of gender and age.

Data Collection Tools

To measure the various dimensions of identity like achievement, moratorium, foreclosure and diffusion, the modified version of Marcia Identity Questionnaire was used. A google survey form was created and distributed to the participants. To answer the questions the scale used was a 5 point likert scale.

Data Analysis Methodology

To analyse the data collected through the google forms on the questionnaire we used the following methods:
1. Jamovi: we used the software Jamovi to do the detailed analysis and statistical calculation of the data using the co-relation function as well as statistics like chi- square test to get the significance for the same.
2. Excel: The data collected was initially manually sorted into various sheets in excel and made into graphs for better understanding and clearer visual comprehension.

Ethical Considerations

-Informed consent: The participants were informed of the motive of the survey before they filled out the form.
-Confidentiality: The data was securely stored.
-Voluntary Participation: Filling out the survey form was totally on the voluntary participation of the participants.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This report analyses the distribution of identity status across young adults based on James Marcia's Identity Status Theory. According to the theory, everyone goes through stages of crisis and commitment in their life that define their identity over time. To Indianize the same, we took data from 57 young adults between the age of 18-25 in order to know how the identity development progresses for the same theory in an India context. The five identity statuses considered are:
1. Achievement: Commitment following exploration
2. Moratorium: Ongoing exploration without commitment
3. Foreclosure: Commitment without exploration
4. Diffusion: Neither exploration nor commitment
5. MAMA: Moratorium-Achievement cycle
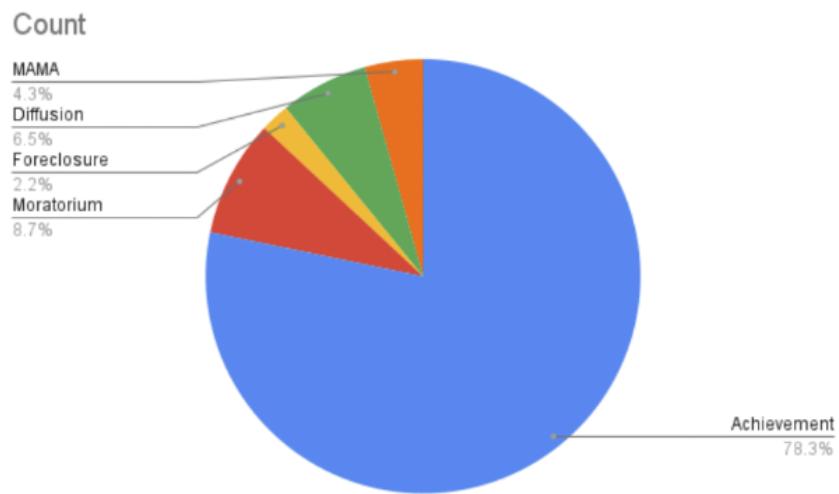
Basically we found that even in an Indian context Identity is not very significantly formed by age or factors that come with age or time. Although the data shows there is a positive relationship between age and identity status and clarity being high by a low significance, it is true that age does affect identity formation alongside one's experiences and commitment. The pie chart below shows how 78.3% of the young adults have achieved the last stage of identity formation while, 8.7% are in a stage of Identity Moratorium, 2.2% are in Identity Foreclosure and 6.5% are still in identity diffusion stage. The remaining 4.3% are still undergoing changes with their identity and going through the cycle of Moratorium and Achievement in varying contexts over time.

DATA COLLECTED

Sr. no	Age	identity		Sr. no	Age	identity
1	19	Achievement		31	19	Achievement
2	18	Achievement		32	19	Achievement
3	19	Moratorium Achievement cycle		33	20	Moratorium
4	21	Achievement		34	21	Moratorium
5	19	Achievement		35	18	Achievement
6	19	Achievement		36	18	Achievement
7	18	Achievement		37	19	Achievement
8	20	Moratorium		38	20	Achievement
9	19	Achievement		39	19	Diffusion
				40	24	Achievement
				41	22	Achievement
				42	20	Achievement

10	19	Achievement	43	18	Achievement
11	20	Achievement	44	20	Achievement
12	21	Achievement	45	20	Achievement
13	19	Achievement	46	19	Achievement
14	21	Diffusion	47	20	Achievement
15	20	Achievement	48	22	Achievement
16	21	Moratorium	49	20	Diffusion
17	19	Achievement	50	20	Achievement
18	20	Achievement	51	18	Achievement
19	18	Moratorium	52	21	Achievement
20	18	Achievement	53	24	Moratorium
21	18	Achievement	54	21	Achievement
22	21	Diffusion	55	19	Achievement
23	23	Moratorium	56	19	Achievement
24	23	Diffusion	57	19	Achievement
25	19	Achievement			
26	20	Achievement			
27	24	Achievement			
28	23	Achievement			
29	20	Foreclosure			
30	20	Moratorium Achievement cycle			

DATA SUMMARY

Age	Achievement	Moratorium	Foreclosure	Diffusion	MAMA	Total
18	5	1	0	0	0	6
19	10	0	0	0	1	11
20	9	1	1	1	1	13
21	3	2	0	1	0	6
22	2	0	0	0	0	2
23	1	1	1	0	0	3
24	2	1	0	0	0	3

A, M, F, D and MAMA
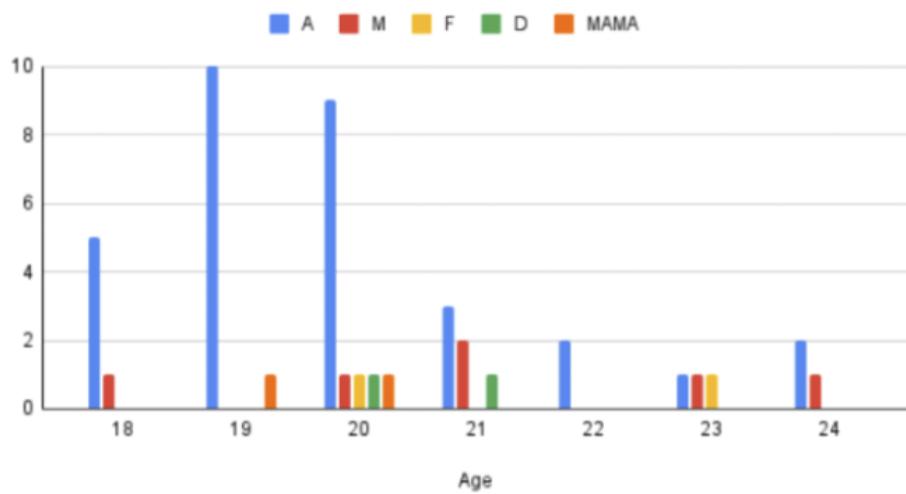
STATISTICAL ANALYSIS

Correlation matrix

		A	B
B	Pearson's r	-0.317	—
	df	55	—
	p-value	0.992	—
	95% CI Upper	1.000	—
	95% CI Lower	-0.502	—
	N	57	—

Note. H$_a$ is positive correlation

Note. * p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001, one-tailed

The p value of the data showed a minorly significant yet positive correlation between age and Identity Achievement where 78% of the population showed achievement of identity across all ages.
- p-value: 0.992

Also the following 8 questions were found to have the least score over all categories:
1. My parents decided a long time ago what I should go into for employment and I'm following through on their plans - 165
2. I don't have any close friends. I just like to hang around with the crowd – 176
3. I'm really not interested in finding the right job; any job will do. I just seem to flow with what is available-178
4. I might have thought about a lot of different jobs, but there's never really any question since my parents said what they wanted -182
5. I'm trying out different types of dating relationships, I just haven't decided what is best for me-183
6. I don't have any real close friends, and I don't think I'm looking for one right now – 186
7. I only go out with the type of people my parents expect me to date – 195
8. I haven't chosen the occupation I really want to get into, and I'm just working at whatever is available until something better comes along -197

Interpretation

The correlation test result was not statistically significant ($p = 0.992$), indicating that there is minorly strong evidence to suggest a relationship between age and identity status in this dataset. But that is because the data collected was in a limited sample with outliers that weren't accounted for.
The p value is greater than 0 showing a positive relationship between age and identity, even though it's less than 1 or minorly significant, with profound research it might prove to be right for a major population too.

1. "My parents decided a long time ago what I should go into for employment and I'm following through on their plans." – This indicates Identity Foreclosure: commitment without exploration. Individuals accept others' values and expectations without questioning them.
- Why it's scored low: While Indian families traditionally influence career decisions heavily, this response scoring lowest may reflect a generational shift. Many young adults are becoming aware that parentally imposed decisions often create dissatisfaction, and they are trying to resist blindly following them. This low score likely reflects growing conflict between traditional family expectations and modern individual aspirations, leaving individuals caught in identity confusion or moratorium.

2. "I don't have any close friends. I just like to hang around with the crowd." – Reflects Identity Diffusion :lack of commitment and exploration in social relationships.
- Why it's scored low: Low scores on this suggest that Indian youth, even when feeling socially uncertain, do desire authentic, intimate friendships. Culturally, friendships are valued and collectivist society places a premium on meaningful group belonging. The low score reflects a discomfort with superficial social bonds and a preference for deeper relational identity development, even if those are lacking.

3. "I'm really not interested in finding the right job; any job will do. I just seem to flow with what is available." – Identity Diffusion
- Why it's scored low: In a competitive and education-focused Indian society, employment is closely tied to identity and family honor. Even if individuals are unsure, apathy toward career choices is socially frowned upon. The low score indicates that most respondents feel pressure to be career-focused, even if unsure of what they want. This shows external pressure may force individuals into a pseudo-identity, suppressing diffusion.

4. "I might have thought about a lot of different jobs, but there's never really any question since my parents said what they wanted." –Identity Foreclosure
- Why it's scored low: Similar to Question 1, the low score reflects growing dissatisfaction with pre-decided career paths. Many Indian youth explore different career options (moratorium) but feel they lack agency to choose due to parental influence. The internal dissonance reflects a crisis stage in identity development.

5. "I'm trying out different types of dating relationships, I just haven't decided what is best for me." – Identity Moratorium.
- Why it's scored low: Indian society remains conservative about dating, especially outside urban or liberal circles. The low score may reflect limited opportunity or societal judgment in exploring romantic relationships freely. Youth may feel guilt, secrecy, or repression while navigating romantic identity, indicating a suppression of moratorium or exploration in the intimacy domain.

6. "I don't have any real close friends, and I don't think I'm looking for one right now." –Identity Diffusion
- Why it's scored low: Indian collectivist values emphasize community, family, and long-term friendships. Even when friendships are weak, the ideal is to form them. This low score may suggest a discomfort with isolation and that emotional closeness is still deeply desired. People may feel disconnected, but they don't see it as acceptable or fulfilling, reflecting a struggle rather than acceptance of diffusion.

7. "I only go out with the type of people my parents expect me to date." –Identity Foreclosure
- Why it's scored low: In Indian culture, romantic and marital relationships are highly family-controlled, especially regarding caste, religion, or social background. A low score may indicate inner resistance to these norms. While youth often comply externally, internally they may not identify with those choices. The low score reflects increasing personal agency and desire for romantic autonomy.

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8. "I haven't chosen the occupation I really want to get into, and I'm just working at whatever is available until something better comes along." –Identity Diffusion
- Why it's scored low: Similar to Question 3, individuals feel pressured to choose a stable or high-status job, and "drifting" is seen as failure in Indian society. Even if someone is unsure, they are likely to present a front of career intentionality. This low score suggests that respondents are uncomfortable with uncertainty and may avoid acknowledging diffusion due to societal expectations.

OBSERVED TRENDS

Despite the lack of statistical significance, several practical patterns are evident:
● Achievement status is most prevalent between the ages of 18 and 20
● Moratorium and Diffusion statuses appear more frequently after the age of 20.
  ● The MAMA pattern is observed at ages 19 and 20, suggesting a phase of identity re-evaluation.
These trends align with established psychological theories, which propose that early identity commitments may be subject to further exploration and refinement as individuals progress through young adulthood.

Although the statistical test did not indicate a significant association between age and identity status, the observable trends are consistent with developmental theory. With a larger sample size, these trends may achieve statistical significance. The data supports the view that identity formation is a dynamic process influenced by age-related factors and experiences.

AGE-RELATED TRENDS IN IDENTITY DIFFUSION

- Identity Diffusion is regarded as the initial and most underdeveloped phase in Marcia's framework. At this point, people exhibit minimal amounts of both exploration (experimenting with various ideas or roles) and commitment (deciding on values, goals, or identity). They often float through life without a clear aim or defined purpose, frequently feeling detached from others and unsure of their true identity.

- In contrast to those who engage in exploration or commitment, individuals in diffusion might steer clear of contemplating their future; this absence of an identity framework may result in sensations of aimlessness, disconnection, or emotional dullness.

- Among Indian youth between 18 and 24 years old, identity diffusion can manifest as confusion regarding career choices, personal convictions, or values, particularly when young individuals have limited opportunities or support to explore their inclinations. As diffusion typically emerges in early adolescence and diminishes with age, it is less prevalent by early adulthood; however, if it continues, it could indicate that the individual has not yet undertaken meaningful self-exploration or established any significant commitments. Individuals trapped in diffusion frequently express feelings of low self-worth, diminished motivation, and limited involvement in personal or social objectives.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

- Limitations:

1. Sampling Limitations
The data that was collected included an uneven age distribution making it difficult to analyse and generalise the data. Hence the sampling could have been more varied and included an equal number of participants from all age groups. Also because the sampling method was random some of the participants did not fill out the questionnaire truthfully and tried to fill the form without interest leading to redundant answers or same choices for all questions which later had to be removed from the data analysis. A regulated and non biased sample should have been selected but the lack of time and the willingness of individuals influenced the sample. Finally, working with a larger sample size would have given us more accurate results which was one of our biggest limitations.

2. Socio-Cultural Constraints on Identity Exploration questionnaire

Within the Indian collectivist framework, choices regarding careers, beliefs, and relationships are largely influenced by family, caste, or community standards. Young adults frequently encounter restricted educational and employment opportunities, along with limited freedom to pursue ideological or relationship decisions, particularly if these differ from societal norms. This structural constraint complicates the transition for many from the moratorium stage to achievement, or may lead them to move too hastily towards foreclosure, where an identity is accepted without adequate exploration.

3. Peer, Social Media & Self-Presentation Biases while answering

Today's youth are subjected to an unprecedented level of comparison and pressure to present themselves positively through social media. These platforms heighten social comparison—resulting in insecurity or a fragmented sense of self—and magnify peer norms across social class, gender, or beliefs that may clash with their genuine values. Consequently, many individuals find themselves in an extended moratorium phase, reassessing their identity in light of fluctuating social benchmarks.

4. Intersectional Challenges: Caste, Class, Gender, and Geography were not accounted for in the questionnaire

Elements such as caste, socio-economic status, gender identity, and the divide between rural and urban areas significantly influence the trajectory of identity development. Youth from lower-caste backgrounds or those facing economic hardships often encounter discrimination and limited opportunities, while societal gender norms restrict the freedom to explore unconventional roles, particularly for women seeking relationships or careers that challenge traditional expectations. Consequently, intersectional marginalisation can hinder or complicate the transition from exploration to achievement.

CONCLUSION

Identity formation is influenced by various factors but the formation of an identity for an individual has multiple dimensions.Through this research, we were able to understand that the young adults have majorly completed this task of establishing an identity according to their age. Even though the correlation established between age and Identity Achievement was not very significant, the P value showed a positive co-relation of 0.992.

Understanding the complexities of identity formation and its variation among young adults is very essential for developing effective strategies to support their academic and personal growth,and helping their transition from adolescence to adulthood. This study reveals that identity development is shaped by a mix or combination of individual experiences, socio-cultural influences, family expectations and values rather than by age alone. Recognising diverse pathways and challenges faced by young adults including the intersectional impacts of caste,gender,class and environment highlights the critical need for tailored approaches.

By addressing all those unique challenges and strengthening support and providing a supportive environment whether in educational institutions,communities or families stakeholders can nurture a healthy identity exploration and foster a sense of autonomy and commitment among young adults.

Ultimately, embracing an holistic, flexible and inclusive framework for Identity development empowers young adults to navigate their transition into adulthood from adolescence and thrive to fulfill the demands of a challenging society, build resilient self-concepts and achieve their true

potential. Policymakers and institutions must commit to ongoing research and adaptation to ensure that all young people are given a chance or facilitated to shape their identities and future.

The study brings the scope of further research with a larger sample and Indianised version of the questionnaire. We observed that in the Indian context, family norms and cultural beliefs play a very significant role in a person finding and associating themselves to a particular identity. We can conclude that with relation to various factors such as peer pressure, conformity, and cultural beliefs, Age drives the formation of one's Identity.

AUTHOR CREDENTIALS

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