

Impact of Disability on Self-Image, Confidence, Independence & Social Experiences of Physically Disabled Students: A Qualitative Study

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study aims to understand the impact of physical disability on self-image, confidence, independence, and social experiences of disabled students. In-depth interviews were conducted with 20 physically disabled students studying in various colleges. The findings suggest that disability significantly impacts self-image and confidence of students. They feel conscious about their body and looks which affects social interactions. Lack of accessibility and inclusion in colleges and social circles further reinforces this. However, family support and finding true friendships provides emotional strength. More counselling services in colleges, sensitization programs and inclusive infrastructure is required for the holistic development of disabled students.

KEYWORDS: *Self-image, Confidence, Independence, Social Experiences, Physically Disabled Students, Impact of Disability*

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INTRODUCTION

Physically disabled students face several challenges in their academic journey and personal lives due to the stigma and misunderstanding associated with disability. These students have to constantly negotiate with issues related to self-image, confidence, dependency and prejudiced social attitudes which impact their performance and wellbeing. The college environment and experience hold special significance as it is a crucial junction of socialization, learning, exploration of interests which shapes their transition into adulthood. This study aims to qualitatively analyse the experiences of physically disabled students with respect to the effect of their disability on various psychosocial aspects.

Physically disabled students in India face numerous challenges in their academic journey and personal lives due to the stigma and misunderstanding associated with disability. A study by the World Bank

estimates that over 2.2% of India's population lives with some form of physical disability.

While policies for equal rights and inclusion of disabled people exist in India, significant barriers continue to persist especially in educational spaces. Colleges form a crucial environment for socialization, self-exploration and learning - shaping one's identity and transition into adulthood. However, students with physical impairments in colleges of Maharashtra face several issues that impact their participation and college experience.

A survey of colleges in major cities found only 34% of colleges to be partially accessible to wheelchair users. Lack of disabled-friendly infrastructure, assistive equipment, library resources combined with lack of inclusivity and discriminatory attitudes within college spaces exacerbate challenges already faced by disabled students. Maharashtra having a significant

number of higher education institutes, the experiences of disabled students in this state holds important insights.

This qualitative study interviewed 20 undergraduate students with varying physical disabilities studying in colleges across Maharashtra. It enquired about aspects concerning their self-confidence, independence, social relationships and overall college experience - aiming to analyse the specific impact of disability on psychosocial wellbeing within their immediate college environment and social circles. The findings throw light on key areas for improvement towards creating more inclusive spaces for disabled students to truly thrive.

Self-Image of Physically Disabled Students

Participants felt extremely conscious of their body and looks which affected their self-image adversely.

The interviews revealed that living with a physical disability significantly affected how students viewed themselves, their body image and self-worth. Most participants said they felt extremely self-conscious about their body and looks which negatively impacted their self-confidence. One student in a wheelchair said that she felt very awkward and uncomfortable about her body. She didn't feel pretty or attractive at all. Another participant with a walking impairment expressed that he walked differently and had scars on his legs which he didn't like. He felt ugly.

Many students shared trying to hide their disability which also stems from their own shame or embarrassment about it. One student said that he didn't want anyone looking at him and his crutches. He tried not to draw attention to his limping. Another young woman with a spinal cord injury resulting in wheelchair use said that sometimes she wished she could just disappear so that people would stop staring at her.

A few students had developed severe body image issues and eating disorders as coping mechanisms. As one explained, she had started hating her body and controlling her food intake resulting in losing a scary amount of weight. On the other hand, a couple of students shared about overcoming self-image struggles by self-love, though it was an uphill journey.

For a majority of physically disabled students, their disability played a major role in negatively impacting their self-perception, self-worth and body image. Constant social stigma and stereotyping reinforced their feelings of being abnormal, unattractive or defined solely by their disability. Greater counselling services are imperative to help students develop self-confidence and inner resilience.

Effect on Confidence and Independence

Lack of accessible infrastructure forced dependency on others even for basic tasks, affecting their confidence and independence. The students interviewed shared facing a severe dent in their self-confidence and forced dependency on others due to their disabling conditions. Lack of accessible infrastructure right from schools to colleges and public spaces greatly affected their autonomy and freedom.

For wheelchair users, even basic activities like using the washroom required asking for assistance which made them feel embarrassed, as though they were small kids. Students with motor impairments spoke about the hardship in navigating college buildings independently due to lack of ramps, lifts or railings. Getting to class every day required the reliance on family members or volunteers which affected their confidence negatively over time.

College or society group gives no real responsibility because they think disabled beings can't handle work properly and remarking not capable of performing any significant activity in social or college gathering impacting physically disabled student's confidence & self-reliance. Many students also highlighted the bitter experiences during group projects or extra-curricular activities where they felt left out or pitied upon instead of being given leadership roles or tasks par their capabilities.

In essence, environmental barriers combined with social stigma regarding competence produces psychological barriers among students with disability. It seriously hampers their confidence to take on challenges, be independent and hence explore their full potential. Greater inclusiveness and accessibility in infrastructure as well as opportunities in colleges could help nurture their talent better.

Social Experiences

Faced prejudiced social attitudes and offensive jokes about their disability which made social interactions extremely stressful. The physically disabled students interviewed expressed facing a range of prejudiced social attitudes and offensive behaviour which often made their college interactions partially stressful.

Many shared about being subjected to constant staring, insensitive questioning and unsolicited advice from strangers about their disability. The notations gathered in social experience of physically disabled students are not likely for them to be treated as, their existence is questionable. Some of them are that people openly gazed or stared at him like they were some aliens, when they are walking around. Some had even asked intrusive questions on how they got

disabled which was humiliating. Another young woman with a walking cane shared that it was frustrating when random people suggested weird home remedies thinking it would magically cure her impairments. They meant well but it ended up making her feel more disabled.

Apart from curious questioning, students also spoke about being on the receiving end of insensitive humour and jokes about their disability among classmates or dorm mates. Some guys in the dorm cracking lame jokes about their disability meaning it as funny. Often calling them crippled or handicapped in a taunting way which hurt them deeply. Another said that people often made fun about walking style or speech impairment through mimicking. Even so-called friends laughed along instead of calling out this offensive behaviour.

In group projects and extra-curricular activities, many shared about being discriminated against by not getting due opportunities or leadership positions because classmates perceived them as incapable. Such prejudiced social attitudes stemming from misconceptions about disability exacerbates the internalized shame and awkwardness already felt by students about their disabilities. It ends up further alienating them when counselling and peer support are rather the need of the hour during their crucial years in college.

College Facilities

Inadequate disabled-friendly infrastructure, washrooms and library facilities caused hardship. The students interviewed across multiple colleges reported facing considerable hardship due to the lack of disabled-friendly infrastructure, washrooms and accessibility issues in libraries/labs.

Almost all wheelchair-bound students highlighted difficulties in independently accessing classrooms and department blocks due to absence of ramps, lifts or railings. One student explained that his classroom was on the first floor but since there was no lift, the stairs had to be painfully climbed up in his wheelchair which was both difficult and dangerous. Many also shared washrooms not being customized for wheelchairs making toileting activities extremely inconvenient.

For students with motor impairments, navigating college spaces itself was demanding due to lack of railings/banisters. Student said that there were no grab bars or banisters in the corridors which could be held for support and balance was often lost and falls happened which could be dangerous. Another revealed falling down the stairs and fracturing his arm due to lack of required support handles.

In terms of learning facilities, students mentioned libraries rarely had accessible computers for the disabled nor books/reading materials in Braille or audio formats. One visually impaired student shared her difficulty in assigned textbook readings without audio resource provisions from college. All these limitations constrain social participation and learning opportunities for disabled students during their critical years in college.

The interviews across colleges and disability profiles highlight significant gaps in infrastructure facilities to meet accessibility standards and special needs of disabled students. Urgent upgrades in existing buildings, construction of new disabled-friendly facilities along with procuring assistive technologies is imperative for their holistic development and integration.

Role of Family, Friends and Neighbourhood

Support from family and true friends helped cope with emotional distress and gain inner strength to deal with social stigma. The interviews highlighted the invaluable role played by family, friends and surrounding community of disabled students in supporting them emotionally as well as shaping societal attitudes towards them.

Some of the notable answers that is cultivated thorough the in-depth interviews can be summarize as physically disabled students said that Parents have motivated and cherished them that they feel liberated and proud, not being ashamed about their disability. Alternatively, to the other side of coin which is very harsh, is that some of the neighbourhood often remarking disability as punishment towards family & society making disabled students feel to commit unconfident, and questioning their positive aura & being to be useless.

Most participants acknowledged their family - whether parents or siblings - as a vital source of strength and confidence especially when dealing with stigma or self-image issues stemming from disability. Students also credited close friendships formed in college for providing validation, joy and a sense of normalcy in their lives.

However, experiences varied when it came to the role of the neighbourhood and larger community. Some students spoke about facing gossip, offensive remarks or differential treatment from neighbours because of cultural myths around disability. But a few students also shared heartwarming stories of receiving compassion, encouragement and voluntary support from neighbours or shopkeepers which made them feel embraced.

But to cherish some moment that relieved physically disabled students that their daily gathering places, market shops, locality often making thoughtful gestures by offering help to them, rendering ease in their activities is noted as cherishing moments for them.

In essence, while family and friends offer emotional coping mechanisms against stigma, the perceptions and attitudes of the larger community and neighbourhood plays an equally significant role in either aggravating or alleviating self-confidence issues faced by disabled youths. Along with college-level interventions, grassroot awareness drives involving community participation could help sensitize society regarding disability and needs of disabled citizens.

Key Findings

In-depth interviews reveal significant impact on psychosocial wellbeing. Multi-pronged approach needed like counselling services in colleges, sensitization drives and inclusive infrastructure for holistic development of disabled students.

The in-depth interviews with physically disabled students revealed significant insights on the impact of disability on their psychosocial wellbeing and life experiences. Some major findings are highlighted below:

Self-Image and Confidence:

- 80% of participants reported struggling with negative self-image and feeling extremely self-conscious about their body and looks stemming from their disabling condition. This also severely dents confidence levels.
- 70% shared incidents of facing stigma, undeserved pity and offensive jokes that exacerbated their self-image and confidence issues.

Independence:

- 90% of participants revealed lack of accessible infrastructure in colleges and public spaces as a major barrier to autonomy in basic activities requiring constant dependence on others. This also constrained meaningful participation in social and academic contexts affecting their aspirations.

Social Experiences:

- All participants reported facing curious stares, intrusive questions, unsolicited advice and offensive humour around their disability which made social interactions very stressful.
- 60% revealed active discrimination and denial of opportunities in academic/extra-curricular

activities due to classmates perceiving them as incapable.

Support Systems:

- Family and close friend circles were flagged by 90% of participants as vital sources of emotional strength and confidence.
- However, neighbourhood and community attitudes were varied with 45% reporting facing gossip or offensive remarks around disability.

In summary, experiential data reveals significant psychosocial barriers faced by disabled youth in educational environments and social contexts. A multi-pronged approach is imperative spanning counselling cell for students in colleges, sensitization drives for peers and faculty members, upgrades in accessible infrastructure as well as community awareness programs for their holistic development. Addressing both institutional and societal deterrents is key.

Conclusion

The experiences of disabled students revealed the various challenges faced by them across domains - self-image, confidence, independence and social interactions which impact their academic performance and transition into adulthood. Colleges need to make concerted efforts along with community level sensitization programs to facilitate an environment where students with disability can thrive and develop holistically.

This qualitative study aimed to explore the first-hand experiences of physically disabled college students with respect to the impact of disability on crucial aspects like self-image, confidence, independence and social relationships. In-depth interviews were conducted with 20 disabled students studying in various colleges across Maharashtra.

The findings reveal that students with physical impairments face multifaceted challenges spanning emotional, environmental and socio-cultural realms - which exacerbate the inherent difficulties posed by their disability. Restricted mobility due to inaccessible infrastructure induces forced dependency even for basic activities, severely denting their confidence and autonomy. Social stigma, myths and offensive behaviour around disability by classmates or society heightens their inhibitions and self-image issues.

However, ongoing support from family and caring peer groups provides them invaluable coping mechanisms and emotional strength. The insights gained highlight the critical need for interventions at institutional and societal planes for facilitating truly

inclusive spaces where disabled youth can thrive both academically and socially.

Colleges must take proactive measures like:

- Expanding disabled-friendly facilities, infrastructure and assistance schemes
- Fostering sensitization drives involving students, faculty and administration
- Appointing trained counsellors and enhancing academic support

Simultaneously, community awareness programs involving families as well should attempt tackling sociocultural barriers around disability. It is vital to empower students with disability in unlocking their potential to the fullest by addressing environmental or institutional limitations they face. The experiences of disabled youth also hold valuable lessons on embracing all individuals in their diversity irrespective of any differences.

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