

White Lines Collective – Provoking conversation about mental health in higher educational institutions through creative practices

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ABSTRACT

This research inquiries about how conversation about mental health (MH) in higher educational institutions in India can be provoked through design and creative practices. It explores PD by contextualizing the problem to a location and demographic, and involved various modes of collaboration and co-creation in the research process and development of outcomes. The project recognized student communities as both stakeholders and users in the provided context. The designer functions as the ‘facilitator’ of conversation through spatial interventions. The aim was to create ways for student communities to interact through various media and form emotionally and mentally ‘safe spaces’. As a result, spatial experiences that enabled awareness about MH were created.

Author Keywords

Mental health; awareness; co-creation; collaboration; student community; visual works; art; experience; participation; community engagement.

INTRODUCTION

The White Lines Collective bridges the gap between UN SDG-3.4 (Good Health and Wellbeing) [1] and UN SDG-11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities) [2].

The Collective envisions inclusive educational communities. It nurtures ‘safe spaces’ that encourage open conversation, to form cohesive and empathetic student communities.

Executed in the National Institute of Design, Ahmedabad (NID-A), the Collective engaged the student

community in conversation about MH in various participatory ways; marking World Mental Health Day (WMHD), a blindfolded-conversation experience, and an arts exhibition. These allowed freedom of expression and created an avenue for interpretation, communication and awareness.

CONTEXT

The student population, one of India’s largest demographic groups, is widely suffering from MH concerns. A study [3] concluded that over 35% of Indian university students struggle with moderate MH issues. Many MH organizations run programs for adolescents and schools, but few in universities. Lack of awareness and professional help, and stigmatization prevent students from receiving help.

PROCESS

Research built an understanding of MH in India and the student scenario, through material by the World Health Organization (WHO) [4] and Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR), scientific journals and specialist interviews. The Ahmedabad Declaration 1979 document [5] was referred to and reinterpreted for data categorization. For a localized understanding of MH, several research exercises were carried out in NID-A. It was imperative to remain empathetic, sensitive and non-judgmental at this time.

Student Interviews

The interviews helped gain qualitative information about MH in the university environment. They were an avenue for interviewees to converse in a safe space, and helped build the project’s objectives.

Co-creation Workshop

The workshop enabled participants to contribute to solution-building. It encouraged attendees to interact,

learn and create solutions they find viable as MH interventions through a series of pre-planned activities.



Figure 1. Student participants engaged in an exercise about scenario building in the co-creation workshop

White Lines Journal

To gauge the feasibility of creativity-based interventions, the White Lines Journal, a prompted sketchbook, was distributed to select students. It aided in creative exploration related to the university environment, student community and user.

INFERENCES AND INTERVENTIONS

Whilst there was awareness of MH concerns, students fear judgment for sharing personal information, or speaking openly. There was a need for avenues to express oneself in spaces designed for sensitive conversation. Arts and conversation-based experiences allow freedom of expression; they provide a larger space for interpretation, communication, and awareness. It became important to design specifically for the presented context, and avoid generalizations in the outcomes.

World Mental Health Day 2019

Over 120 green ribbons were made and distributed on WMHD. Through passive participation, the ribbon, a subtle intervention, became a conversation starter. It was a means to educate those unaware of MH awareness and WMHD.

Operio; A Collective Experience

'Operio'; a participatory experience, gave two blindfolded individuals who are unknown to each other an opportunity to converse. The experience tested the hypotheses that;

- lack of visual information reduces judgment in conversations (inferred from student interviews),
- open, green and natural spaces allow individuals to relax and express freely [6].

Silent No More Exhibition

A culmination of 60 visual works by over 30 students in NID-A, the exhibition showcased various multimedia works about MH narratives. Students participated as artists submitting their works, and visitors of the exhibition. The exhibition highlighted different approaches to creating campus-wide dialogue about MH through visual arts. It was a platform for visitors to engage with various narratives, and share their own. It forged a sense of togetherness; we are not alone in our struggles.

For more images and information, please visit <https://whitelinescollective.wixsite.com/home/projects>



Figure 2. View of the Silent No More Exhibition

CONCLUSION

Student and faculty participants concurred that the interventions created safe spaces for awareness, education and conversation about MH. Community engagement numbers and feedback highlighted the necessity of such interventions in strengthening student communities.

The Collective continues its work and plans to involve more educational institutions, engaging a larger group of diverse students. It will focus on student MH narratives and engage with different models of participation and collaboration through digital means.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Abhirami Suresh would like to thank Tanishka Kachru and Jonak Das, senior faculty of Exhibition Design at NID-A for their guidance during the project conceptualization. The Collective also gratefully acknowledges the contribution from the NID-A student community in sharing their stories, visual works, ideas and assistance in executing interventions.

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