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Article

Body Shaming: A Normalized Form of Bullying in Schools

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Abstract:

School and peers are important elements of a student's microsystem, and in the adolescent years, it becomes crucial to have a healthy and supportive environment. Body shaming is a form of bullying and is less studied in the Indian school context. The objective of the study was to find the prevalence and impact of body shaming on adolescents in school. An explanatory sequential mixed-method research design was used to study the stated objectives with a sample of 126 students aged 14-18 years. The quantitative data findings reflect that body shaming as a construct is not prevalent in the school selected for the study. However, qualitative findings suggest that there is a prevalence of body shaming but not considered a problematic act by the students. The findings led to the conclusion that there is a lack of awareness about body shaming, and its impact needs to be studied with a larger population.

Keywords: Body Shaming, School Environment, Coping Mechanism, Body Shaming Prevalence, Bullying

1. INTRODUCTION

Adolescence is a crucial period for overall development, and the role of a healthy and supportive external environment in the family, at school, and in the wider community is important (World Health Organization, 2021). This is also the period when physical appearance takes center stage in an adolescent's life. The pressure to look a certain way becomes prominent. A study conducted in the Republic of Ireland revealed that adolescents feel significant pressure to conform to appearance expectations, and deviation from such expectations leads to negative peer experience (Kenny et al., 2016). The expectation to look a certain way comes from peers, social media, and family. In a qualitative examination of weight stigma, it was found that family is a common source of stigmatization. Critical weight comments and teasing are common among family members (Lawrence et al., 2022).

This constant teasing and mocking based on physical appearance is body shaming. Various studies conducted in different parts of the world have shown the negative impacts of body shaming. Body shaming predicts depression symptoms, poor social relations, school absenteeism, and unhealthy eating habits like bulimia nervosa and anorexia (Brewis & Bruening, 2018; Gam et al.,2020; Mustapić et al., 2016). Schlüter et al. (2023) in their study, explored the scientific definition of body shaming and its relation to other concepts in social aggression research. This exploratory online study's result reveals that people perceive body shaming as an unrepeated act where they express unsolicited, mostly negative opinions or comments about a target's body, without necessarily intending to cause harm. It can range from well-meant advice to a bitter insult. The research concludes that body shaming is a form of social aggression that negatively affects individuals.

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In the Indian context, body shaming has not been much researched or interpreted due to different factors. Many studies have been conducted in Western countries on body shaming during the early and late stages of adolescence and adulthood, but there is a notable lack of cross-cultural research on this topic. The issue of body shame came to the researcher's notice through a news headline. In 2022, the Kerala Minister in a media interaction said that body shaming is a heinous act and that the Kerala government will create awareness among school students against body shaming. The Kerala Education Ministry is considering making it part of the education curriculum.

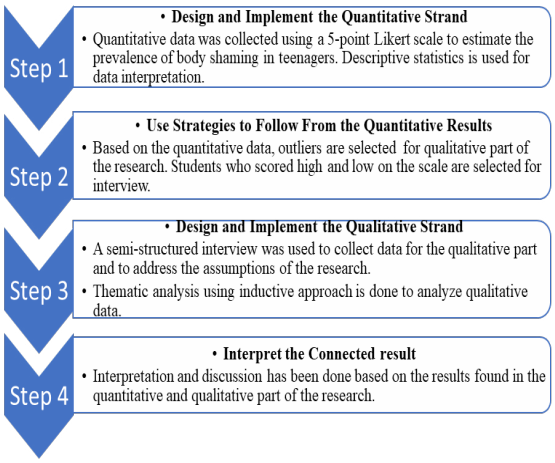
The understanding a student's experiences regarding his/her body appearance is important to study and consider to make schools a better habitat. Peers and school are the most important elements that form the microsystem, where the individual spends considerable time and interacts directly with parents, teachers, peers, and others. Moreover, understanding the nature of body shaming influence will inform the development of educational programs to guide and prevent adolescents from adopting bad coping mechanisms and developing a positive outlook regarding their appearance. Gam et al. (2020) conducted a recent study that underscored the need for further research on body shaming and appearance-based harassment. The study revealed a total prevalence of body shaming at 44.9 percent, surpassing global findings. Considering the significance and need to study body shaming in the school environment, the primary objective of this research is to explore the extent of body shaming prevalence in schools and focus on analysing it from the gender lens and how it impacts adolescent students.

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The main purpose of this research was to find out how body shaming as a construct affects adolescents in school, to find its prevalence in schools, and to understand its prevalence from the gender lens. For the aforementioned purpose, quantitative and qualitative data were collected with the help of tools developed by the researcher.

A mixed-method approach is considered suitable as the quantitative part allowed finding the prevalence of body shaming in a broad sample and provided the sample for the qualitative part of the study. The literature review provided various methodologies to proceed with the stated research problems. These approaches varied based on the collection and interpretation of data. The researcher found the mixed-method approach to be most suitable because the sample selection procedure becomes easy and systematic. Moreover, it provided provision for "subjective insider" and "objective outsider" viewpoints, and also methodological triangulation increased the trustworthiness of the study.

The researcher has used the Explanatory Sequential Mixed Method Research Design. (Creswell,2018). Quantitative and Qualitative data were collected sequentially (QUANT → QUAL). The basic procedure of implementation of the research design was as follows.



The sampling of this study was done separately for the selection of school, selection of students for the survey using a questionnaire, and selection of candidates for interview. To achieve representativeness in the study, purposive sampling was used for school selection.

Simple random sampling was used for the quantitative survey. Thus, 126 students from the school aged between 14-18 years were considered the sample of this study, and for the qualitative part of the study, extreme or deviant case sampling was used to determine the sample based on the responses to the quantitative survey. A total of 12 students were selected for interview based on the analysis of quantitative data, out of which 7 gave their consent to be a part of the one-to-one interaction.

Table1: *The sample distribution by gender for the Quantitative Survey*

Boys	Girls
67 (53.17)	59(46.82)

Table 2: *The sample distribution by gender for the interview.*

Number of candidates for interview	Gender
4	Girls
3	Boys

For data collection, a Questionnaire with a Five-point Likert scale (Cronbach α= 0.809552) was developed to perform the quantitative survey, and for the qualitative part, a semi-structured interview schedule was used to explore the impact of body shaming on adolescents. To analyse the collected data, descriptive and inferential statistics (t-test) were used for quantitative data, and thematic analysis using the inductive approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was used for qualitative data.

3. FINDINGS

Based on the percentile, we divide the average response score into three quartiles to determine the prevalence of body shaming among adolescents in school. The descriptive statistics are presented in Table 3.

Table 3: *Body shaming Prevalence*

		f	%	Cumulative %
Body Shaming Prevalence	Low	42	33.3	33.3
	Average	48	38.1	71.4
	High	36	28.6	100.0
	Total	126	100.0	

The stated hypothesis was

H0: There is no significant difference in the prevalence of body shaming in girls' and boys' students.

H1: There is a significant difference in the prevalence of body shaming in girls' and boys' students.

An independent t-test was conducted to find the difference in the prevalence of body shaming in girls' and boys' students. Before performing statistical analysis, the nature of the data was examined. The distribution of the scores was analysed through the normality test., Kolmogorov–Smirnov test, and visual methods and found to be normally distributed.

Table 4: *Statistical result of Independent t-test for H0*

Gender	N	M	SD	t	p
Female	59	79.25	5.833	1.865	.064
Male	67	81.22	5.984		

The mean score for the female students on the variable 'prevalence of body shaming in school' (M=79.25, SD = 5.833) did not differ statistically significantly (t= 1.865, df= 124, p= 0.064) from male students (M=81.22, SD=5.984) on the same variable.

Hence, null hypothesis H0 is **not rejected**.

The researcher used thematic analysis using the inductive approach to interpret the responses of the students who consented to participate in the interview. The outliers based on the quantitative data were selected for the interview. The researcher has found the following themes based on the analysis:.

3.1. Common perception regarding body shame

Students who have faced body shaming and students who have not faced it have a common perception that body shaming is a casual act. Six out of seven respondents used the word **casual** to describe how they perceive body shaming. Only one student responded that she perceived it as an insult. It has been normalized in the school environment as well as in society. Sadli et al. (2022) highlighted in their research that body-shaming victims feel comfortable and ignore it initially, but over time they realize it is an insult.

3.2. Form of body shaming

Based on the student participants' responses, the following prevalent forms of body shaming in school were identified.

- Weight-based shaming
- Height-based shaming
- Facial appearance-based

The participants shared that people body-shamed them because of their weight, height, and facial appearance. As Janssen et al. (2004) mentioned in their research, overweight children are more likely to be victims and perpetrators of bullying behaviors than their normal-weight peers. In a recent study on body shaming by Arumugam et al. (2022), the findings suggest that having body weight not according to height is one of the reasons for body shaming by others. One of the participants, as mentioned above, shared that they know it is normal to have pimples on their faces during adolescence but still make fun of them.

3.3. Peers' role in body shaming

The responses categorize peers into three groups: the victims, the perpetrators, and the observer. As Maulani et al. (2022) have mentioned in their study, there are two parties involved in cases of bullying, the victim and the perpetrator, but in most cases, there are observers or bystanders who either remain silent or encourage the incident. The same categories are identified in these interactions. The respondents are either victims, perpetrators, or observers of body shaming. One of the findings revealed that both male and female students were victims of body shaming, but there was no instance where a girl was identified as the perpetrator. Also, this needs some attention because those students who responded that body shaming is not a serious thing are themselves perpetrators.

3.4. Body shaming by teachers and school staff

Only two students responded that teachers do body shaming in schools, and the rest of the respondents denied it. The student shared her experience and said that it is never direct comments but the body language of the teachers that makes it more uncomfortable. Teachers say things and then try to cover them through jokes. A recent video surfaced on the internet where a 10-year-old girl has faced body shaming by her teacher. Incidents of weight shaming and using unhealthy vocabulary for students, especially females, regarding their physical appearance have been generally observed, but no empirical study in a school context has been conducted so far on this dimension.

3.5. Effect on academic performance

The student who faced body shaming by the teacher shared that she felt uncomfortable attending that particular teacher's class. No other student reported any effect on academic performance because of body shaming. LPaña et al. (2023) in their study, have found that teenagers focus more on their physical appearance to avoid the judgment of others, which causes them to lose concentration on academic responsibilities. The study emphasizes that body shaming influences their social behavior, which in turn impacts their academic performance. This dimension is crucial to study in the context of the academic performance of students who are body-shaming victims in school.

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3.6. Coping mechanism

Choma et al. (2009) found that heightened body shame was associated with a greater use of appearance fixing and avoidance coping, rather than focusing on positive rational acceptance. The student who has experienced body shaming has adopted avoidance coping, defined by Cash et al. (2005) as an "attempt to evade threats to one's body image and thoughts," while the other victim of body shaming in school has developed a positive rational acceptance coping strategy, defined as "mental and behavioral activities that emphasize the use of positive self-care or rational self-talk and the acceptance of one's experiences" (Cash et al., 2005). The student who has not faced body shaming advocated the use of appearance-fixing coping, characterized by 'efforts to change one's appearance.

3.7. Body shaming outside the school environment

The problem of body shaming is not restricted to a place or person. Female students are more prone to body shaming on social media than male students. Students have experienced body shaming on social media platforms and from strangers; this finding aligns with the findings of a study by Fioravanti et al. (2023), which revealed that females experience higher levels of body shame and control over their body image in photos on social media platforms compared to males. It is also highlighted in the study by Arumugam et al. (2022) that in public situations people are treated differently and made to feel uneasy or embarrassed because of their physical appearance.

3.8. Challenges of body shaming victim

The major challenge that came across is that body shaming is not at all considered an issue. Students who have not faced body shaming directly believed that it is not big of a deal and has no serious effect on anyone. Peers casually engage in it, and those who feel uncomfortable do not belong to that peer group. On the other hand, students who are victims of body shame mentioned that it has a direct effect on their confidence level, clothing choices, social media use, and academic performance. These findings are in agreement with the studies conducted by Choma et al. (2009), LPaña et al. (2023), Kenny et al. (2016), and others. No cases of depressive symptoms were found among the students who participated in the interview. However, this dimension needs further study, as most literature claims that body shaming leads to depression and anxiety.

3.9. Need for awareness program/intervention.

Students agreed that there should be an awareness program or an intervention program for body shaming in school. The study by Brewis and Bruening (2018) showed that something needs to be done. They came to the conclusion that effective campus-based strategies should be used, such as efforts to promote a positive body image, media aimed at teens and young adults, provider training, and making policies that address and ban weight discrimination. This can empower students and reduce the cases of bullying, depression, and anxiety among students. It will also promote healthy coping mechanisms among students and reduce the cases of relational victimization as well as overt victimization in school (Janssen et al.,2004).

4. DISCUSSION

There was no significant difference found based on gender in the prevalence of body shaming in school. Previous studies have highlighted the fact that adolescent girls face higher body shame and depression than boys (Grabe et al.,2007; Mustapić et al.,2016). However, according to the findings of the statistical interpretation of the data in this study, the prevalence of body shame in girls and boys does not differ. The quantitative data findings indicate that the study's selected school does not have a high prevalence of body shaming as a construct. However, the results and findings of the qualitative data indicate a prevalence of body shaming, which the school's students do not consider to be a problematic act. The students believe it is a casual act and feel a part of their peer group because of it. According to the interview data, there is a lack of awareness among students about the harmful effects of body shaming. Both the victim and perpetrator agreed that it was wrong but did not report it as a major problem that needs to be addressed. An interesting observation in the qualitative data was that female students were victims or observers but not perpetrators. In contrast, male students fall in the category of both victims and perpetrators. This also explains the response given by the students on the questionnaire where they were asked about peer victimization. Female students in the interview reported experiencing body shaming, not only outside of school but also from individuals of the opposite gender, a phenomenon that male students did not experience. The experience of male students with body shaming is much more confined to the peer group, where it strengthens their relationship with friends rather than having any negative effect. This further explains the difference in coping strategies adopted by the male and female students. Female students are found less optimistic than male students regarding motivation to improve their physical appearance and accept that they cannot do much about it. The issue of body shaming has been found in adolescents as well as young adults (Brewis & Bruening, 2018; LPaña et al.,2023; Lawrence et al.,2022) which can explain that adolescents of any age range can be victims of body shaming as found in the research. Western cultures, where people are more vocal about the issue and aware of its negative impacts, account for the higher prevalence of body shaming reporting across various age groups in these studies. In the Indian societal context, the concept of body shaming carries a distinct connotation, necessitating additional empirical research from a cultural and societal perspective. Awareness intervention is required in schools to avoid the normalization of body shaming. Gani and Jalal (2020) used psychoeducation to shape students' attitudes towards body shaming in their student research study.

5. CONCLUSION

The study's findings indicate that there is no significant prevalence of body shaming in schools, although there are cases of victims. The possible reason may be the individual's subjective interpretation of the concept. Understanding

the nature of body-shaming influence will inform the development of educational programs to guide and prevent adolescents from adopting bad coping mechanisms and developing a positive outlook regarding their appearance. Schools can teach awareness about body shaming, a form of bullying, and how to handle it through workshops, psychoeducation, and other mediums. Furthermore, schools possess resources such as guidance and counseling cells and trained teachers, which can significantly contribute to raising awareness about body shaming, its impact, and aiding victims. To conclude, our society has normalized body shaming, leaving individuals unsure of how to respond or manage this issue.is a need for awareness interventions about the negative impacts of body shaming.

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Author(s) Contribution

Sole Author work to prepare the manuscript.

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Availability of Data and Materials

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Competing Interests

The author have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Clinical Trial Registration (if applicable)

Not Applicable

Human Ethics and Consent to Participate

The study did not involve any clinical interventions or experiments requiring formal ethical approval.

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