

THE IMPACT OF BODY SHAMING AND ITS EFFECT ON MENTAL WELL-BEING IN YOUTH

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DOI

[10.29121/shodhkosh.v5.i6.2024.6449](https://doi.org/10.29121/shodhkosh.v5.i6.2024.6449)

Funding: This research received no financial assistance from public, commercial or not-for-profit agencies.

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ABSTRACT

Body shaming is bullying a person based on their physical appearance and can impact a person's mental well-being. Body shaming, both self-shaming and shaming from others, can lead to social appearance anxiety and depression. Whereas social appearance anxiety is an individual's anxiety about being evaluated based on their appearance, depression in this context denotes an individual's lost interest in various social activities due to the fear of appearance-based judgment from others. Even though numerous studies have demonstrated the effect of body shaming on mental health, there is a lack of studies assessing the prevalence, patterns and impact of body shaming among young adults and adolescents, who comprise the majority of the Indian population. This research study aimed to understand the body-shaming patterns and their impact on mental well-being in youth. A descriptive research method was employed to collect data from 60 respondents, selected through a simple random sampling technique, from the Kattappana Block Panchayat of Idukki District in Kerala. The results indicated that more than half of the sample faced body shaming in day-to-day life and were worried about their appearance in public, which established a correlation between mental well-being and body-shaming patterns.

Keywords: Body Shaming, Youth, Mental Well-Being, Social Appearance Anxiety, Adolescents

1. INTRODUCTION

The perpetrators of body shaming who bully a person based on their physical appearance may or may not be aware of its impact on the victim. Anyone can be a victim, irrespective of socio-demographic factors. Although body shaming refers to shaming based on a person's physical appearance, it can also affect an individual's mental well-being, social health and professional and personal life. Body shaming, whether experienced internally or externally, can lead to social appearance anxiety and depression. Social appearance anxiety denotes an individual's anxiety *about being evaluated based on their appearance*, and depression in this context denotes an individual's lost interest in various social activities due to the fear of appearance-based judgment from others.

In today's world, popular culture and trends influence individuals and society through social media platforms, movies and other media. This influence, to a great extent, shapes individuals' lifestyles and expectations towards life. Factors such as media exposure, cultural influences and societal norms lead to body idealization, body comparison and

body shaming. The marketing strategies and advertisements of fashion and cosmetic industries often use body-shaming content to sell their products. Sometimes, these advertisements become racist and sexist. Television programs and movies often contain body-shaming jokes and body-image comparisons. Even social media contents that promote thin-body idealization and fairness trigger body shaming when it reaches individuals who do not meet those standards (Aparicio-Martinez et al., 2019). Such individuals feel insecure, and it generates social appearance anxiety to post their pictures or content on social media platforms. At times, family members, peers and friends inadvertently commit body shaming without realizing its impact on the victim. Such jokes, intentional mocking or enemy behaviour will have a significant impact on the physical and mental health of the victim.

Body shaming is increasingly pervasive, particularly among younger generations. Adolescents are vulnerable to various body shaming situations during puberty. Body shaming in youth can affect their body image, directly affecting their self-esteem and self-worth. Low levels of self-esteem, which is dependent on an individual's body image, can lead to depression, anxiety and other mental health issues, including body dysmorphic disorder (BDD). An individual who face body shaming based on their body weight, size or appearance may turn towards unhealthy and unscientific techniques to bring changes to their physical appearance. Such techniques, like unhealthy eating practices, can develop adverse effects, including eating disorders such as anorexia, where a person refuses to eat, or bulimia, where a person commits to binge eating. Disorders such as anorexia, bulimia and BDD are overlooked in Indian societies, and adolescents are particularly vulnerable to them.

Findings of studies on adolescent mental health for the past ten years in India clearly show that mental health problems like anxiety, depression and suicidal behaviour are on the rise in India. The study by Aggarwal and Berk (2015) points out that there is a high risk among the adolescent population towards mental health problems. Gender is an important factor during the developmental phase of adolescence, where children undergo physical changes and enter a maturing phase. Studies demonstrate that the overall well-being of men surpasses that of women. Factors like self-esteem, body image and anxiety are the reasons for this difference. During the transition from young age to adulthood, young girls enhance their self-esteem, while young boys have more self-esteem compared to girls at the same age (Gestsdottir et al., 2015). A study by Gam and colleagues (2020) revealed that adolescents face body shaming often and that body shaming is more prevalent among boys than girls. The study also found that students who were obese faced body shaming more than anyone else. A study conducted by Sugiat (2019) on the students of FISIP Airlangga University, Indonesia, found that females face more body shaming than males. The body-shaming patterns included mockery and jokes about their physical appearance. This makes the individuals feel less confident and more anxious about their public appearance. Another study found that there is no significant difference between body images with respect to gender and that there is a correlation between body image and emotional expression (Saxena et al., 2020). Body shaming among youth, especially during adolescence, leads to low self-esteem, generating negative thoughts; even suicidal thoughts in some cases. It is difficult to bear with the feeling that one's appearance is unaccepted by others, which often leads to a discussion among others. This also necessitates the need for legislation to control cyberbullying on social media platforms (Mustafa et al., 2022).

Although numerous researches have been carried out to study the effect of body shaming on personal and mental health, there is a lack of studies assessing body-shaming patterns and their effects on youth in Indian societies. This study is focused on the prevalence, perpetrators and perception towards body shaming among young adults. Since young adults and adolescents comprise the majority of the Indian population, it is essential to find out how and in what ways body shaming affects their development and social life.

2. METHODS

A descriptive research design was used to conduct the study, which had the following three objectives: (1) to understand the socio-demographic details of the respondents, (2) to measure the prevalence of body shaming among the youth and (3) to identify the relationship between the socio-demographic data and body shaming. The study was conducted on young adults in Kattappana Municipality in the Idukki District of Kerala, who were selected using a simple random sampling method. The universe of the study comprised 60 respondents, 23 males (38.33%) and 37 females (61.67%), aged between 18 and 24 years.

Official permission to collect data for the study was obtained from the respective institutions, ensuring ethical aspects at each stage. It was assured to the participants that their participation was purely voluntary and that they were

free to withdraw from the study at any stage without cost or reason. All participants gave written consent to participate in the study. Confidentiality was ensured and maintained throughout the study.

To study the perception and impact of body shaming among the respondents, a mix of quantitative and qualitative techniques was employed. A self-administered questionnaire (quantitative approach) and a self-prepared interview schedule (qualitative approach) were utilized to gather data from the respondents. The socio-demographic details, including gender, age, educational qualification, family size, source of income, monthly income and religion, were collected using the self-administered questionnaire. The Warwick Edinburgh Mental Well-being Scale (WEMWS) was used to evaluate the respondents' well-being. WEMWS is a 14-item scale that measures the mental well-being of the study population by summing responses to five categories of items, which are 'None of the Time', 'Rarely', 'Some of the Time', 'Often' and 'All of the Time'. The social appearance anxiety of the respondents was evaluated with the help of the Social Appearance Anxiety Scale (SAAS) developed by Hart and colleagues (2008). It is a 16-item, five-point Likert scale that ranges from 'Strongly Disagree' to 'Strongly Agree'. While the first item of SAAS is reversely coded, the other fifteen are straightforward. The scale has no time constraints and can be used individually or in groups. The scores range between 16 and 80. An increase in the SAAS score indicates an increase in an individual's social appearance anxiety.

Both exploratory and mixed-method statistical approaches were used to study the quantitatively and qualitatively collected data. The data obtained were screened for possible errors and analysed. Scale scores and socio-demographic variables were data cleaned and transformed. While scale scores were analysed using mean and standard deviation, socio-demographic variables were analysed using frequencies and percentages. These processes helped in the preparation of graphs and charts that were used to analyse and interpret the data and draw conclusions.

3. RESULTS

3.1. ATTITUDE TOWARDS APPEARANCE

Chart 1

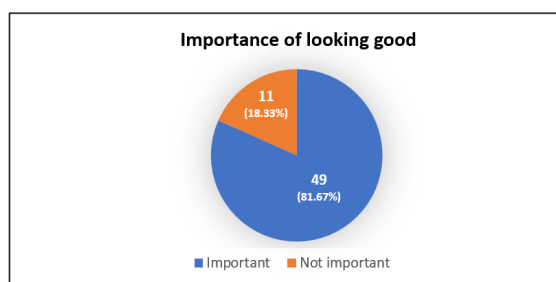


Chart 1 Pie chart illustrating respondents' perspective on the importance of looking good.

The above chart (Chart 1) depicts the respondents' attitude towards the importance of looking good or perfect. When asked about the importance of appearance, 49 respondents (81.67%) admit that it is important to look good, whereas the remaining 11 (18.33%) think it is not important. This shows that more than two-thirds of the youth population is obsessed with appearance and makes it clear that they evaluate others by their looks.

3.2. BODY-COMPARISON AMONG THE YOUTH

Chart 2

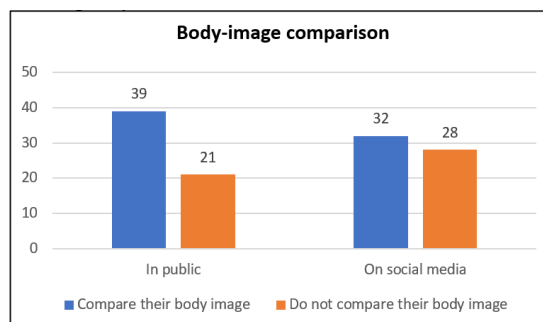
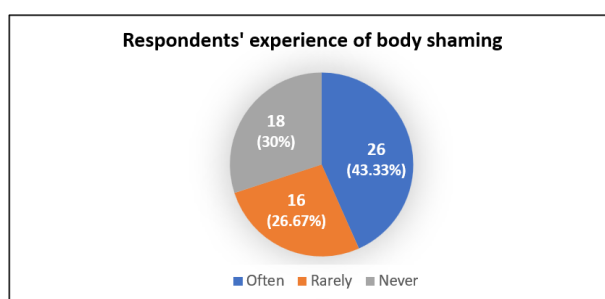


Chart 2 Bar chart illustrating the self-comparison behaviour of youth.

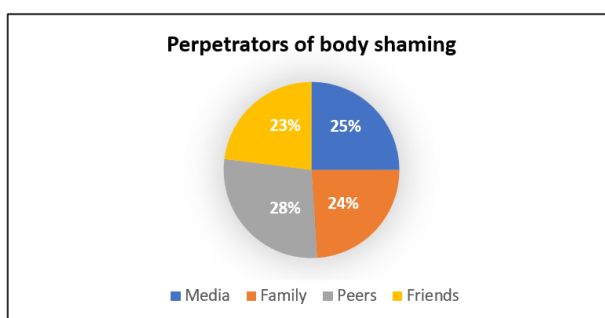
The above chart (Chart 2) depicts how the youth self-compare their body image with others when in public and on social media. Of the 60 respondents, 39 (65%) admitted that they compare their body image and appearance with others in public. Similarly, 32 (53.33%) admitted that they compare their body image and appearance with others they see on social media platforms. These results clearly show the prevalence of body-image comparison among the youth.

3.3. PREVALENCE OF BODY SHAMING AMONG THE YOUTH

Chart 3**Chart 3** Pie chart illustrating respondents' experience of body shaming.

As the above chart (Chart 3) depicts, when asked about their experience of body shaming, about 70% of the respondents admitted to having faced body shaming at least once in their lifetime. While 26 (43.33%) of the 60 respondents admitted that they face body shaming often, 16 (26.67%) admitted that they face body shaming rarely. The remaining 18 (30%) stated to have never faced body shaming in their lifetime. However, almost 90% of the respondents admitted that they have witnessed body shaming happening to others. The results depict that body shaming is very much prevalent among the youth.

3.4. PERPETRATORS OF BODY SHAMING

Chart 4**Chart 4** Pie chart depicting perpetrators of body shaming.

The above chart (Chart 4) illustrates the share of media, family, peers and friends towards the prevalence of body shaming. Of the 60 respondents, 37 (61.67%) reported facing body shaming from media. While 35 (58.33%) of the total 60 reported that they face body shaming from their family members, 41 (68.33%) of 60 stated it was from their peers. In the case of friends, 34 (56.67%) of 60 admitted that they faced body shaming from their friends' circle. Detailed analysis of the above data shows that most face body shaming from their peers (28%), followed by media (25%), family (24%) and friends (23%).

3.5. GENDER-WISE BODY SHAMING

Chart 5

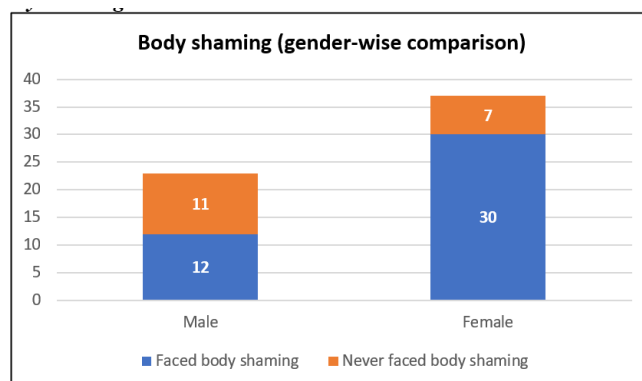


Chart 5 Bar chart illustrating the gender-wise comparison of body shaming.

As it is clear from the above chart (Chart 5), females face more body shaming than males. While only 12 (52.17%) of the 23 male respondents reported having faced body shaming, 30 (81.08%) of the 37 female respondents reported facing body shaming. Hence, females have a higher chance of being victims of body shaming than men.

3.6. SOCIAL APPEARANCE ANXIETY

The following chart (Chart 6) depicts the prevalence of social appearance anxiety among the respondents. When asked whether they were anxious about their appearance being evaluated by others, 25 (41.67%) respondents admitted being anxious. This shows that nearly 50% of the youth have social appearance anxiety. Such insecurities are directly connected to the low self-confidence and self-esteem of the individuals.

Chart 6

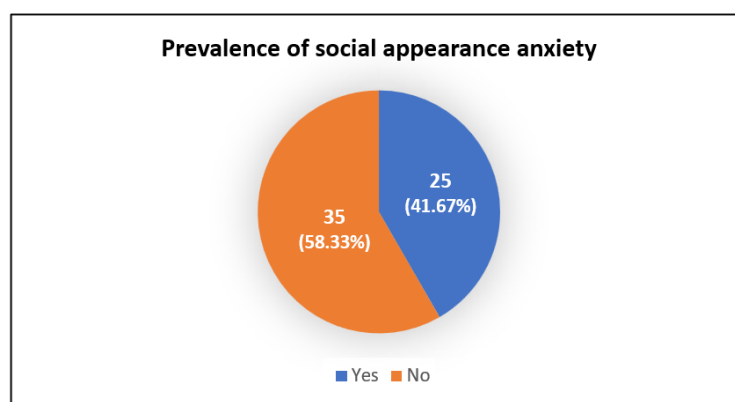


Chart 6 Pie chart illustrating the prevalence of social appearance anxiety in the youth.

4. DISCUSSION

The findings of the study demonstrate that body shaming is prevalent among the youth even in the remote parts of the country. Almost 70% of the respondents have been victims of body shaming at least once in their lifetime, and 43% admit to facing body shaming often. The study revealed that 60% of the studied youth self-compares their body image. This often becomes body shaming and hurts an individual's confidence and self-esteem. It is significant to note that peers, media, family and friends equally contribute to body shaming. This underscores the fact that youth are vulnerable to body shaming from all aspects of their lives, which is a serious issue and needs to be addressed as a public health concern. Gender-wise evaluation of body shaming demonstrates that females are more prone to body shaming than males. The results also align with the existing literature and suggest that body shaming instigates low self-esteem and can lead to

mental health disorders such as anxiety and depression. Almost 60% of the respondents admit to suffering from social appearance anxiety.

Various factors such as lack of sex education and awareness about body changes during adolescence; baseless conceptions and beliefs related to ideal body, skin tone and body weight; socio-cultural beliefs and expectations; and influence of popular culture and trends contribute to body shaming. The victims tend to spend more time and money on beauty products, workouts and unhealthy food habits, which can result in physical and mental health issues.

Since the prevalence of body shaming among adolescents and young adults is a social threat that affects the development and social life of youth, targeted interventions and support systems to mitigate the adverse effects of body shaming on the mental well-being of youth are of utmost importance for society and the country as a whole. Social workers have a role to play in helping the young generation develop a healthy body image and not fall prey to body shaming and its related mental disorders. Educational and awareness programs promoting body positivity, media literacy and healthy body image should be organised to empower young people with knowledge and skills to critically evaluate the set misconceptions and beauty standards, challenge and tackle harmful comments and messages, and cultivate a positive body image. By establishing support cells, it can be ensured that victims of body shaming have access to counselling and support services to address their mental health issues. Social work campaigns that promote awareness about eating disorders and appearance-related anxieties need to be organised. Though forcing the media and fashion industries to adopt neutral marketing strategies that are free of racial and body-shaming jokes is not an easy task, social workers can help create awareness among the youth against the unrealistic and malicious beauty ideals perpetuated by the media and advertising industries. By engaging in advocacy efforts, social workers can create more supportive and inclusive environments where differences in body size, skin tone, body shape and appearance are celebrated rather than stigmatised. This can help create an empathetic and equitable society with a healthy and productive young population.

5. CONCLUSION

This study aimed to assess the prevalence, perpetrators and impact of body shaming among a randomly selected set of Indian youth. The findings of the study demonstrated that adolescents and young adults from even the remote parts of the country experience body shaming, which has a direct impact on the mental well-being of the young population. These findings underscore the need for sex education; awareness about body positivity, media literacy and healthy body image; and support services to help youth, who comprise the majority of the Indian population, mitigate the adverse effects of body shaming. Social workers have a role in implementing the above-mentioned remedies and creating a progressive society that accepts and appreciates all people regardless of their appearance.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

None.

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