

Effects of Body Shaming on the Behaviour of University Students in Dhaka, Bangladesh

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Abstract

Body shaming occurs when individuals are judged by people to not fulfill their expectation in terms of physical appearance. Weight shaming, skinny shaming, skin tone shaming, hair shaming and shaming for other parts of the body are found in this study. This study has tried to find out the effects of body shaming on the behaviour of university students in the city of Dhaka according to three objectives: how body shaming affects an individual's self-image; how body shaming affects an individual's interpersonal and social behaviour and, finally, how the victims of body shaming cope with the experience. This study is based on qualitative research. Data was collected through in-depth interviews of 40 (20 males, 20 females) students from different public and private universities in Dhaka, Bangladesh. A purposive sampling technique has been selected to choose respondents. At the end of the study, some recommendations have been suggested for the victims to overcome the experience of body shaming and also some suggestions are given for how it can be prevented.

Key Words: *behaviour; body shaming; interpersonal behaviour; self-image; social behaviour*

1. Introduction

1.1. Background of the Study

Globalization brings various new and interesting topics to our society. It brings different types of media contents and creates certain standards to measure almost everything against, for example in fashion or in the context of beauty. The standard of beauty has been a changing term through the years. Nowadays, both men and women have a massive interest of the standards of beauty. Beauty standards are influenced by race and country (Laarhoven, 2018). In Japan, having pink blush under the eyes is considered as being cute, innocent and youthful (Magnusdottir, 2015). On the other hand, in western countries, women having bigger breasts with a thin body are considered as attractive and young-looking (Laarhoven, 2018). Beauty standards are now a subjective judgement in every society. Every age, society and culture has different beauty standards. But generally, people label a female person beautiful when she is tall, has a nice figure, white skin and long hair (relative to others). A male person is labeled handsome if he is tall, has an athletic body and white skin (again, relative to others) (Damanik 2018). Usually, society treats people as special if they can fulfill the required beauty standard and undervalue those who cannot reach the standards of beauty. Recently people are more likely to talk about these differences of physical appearances and this leads to the occurrence of body shaming terminology (Sugiati, 2016:16).

Many people in every society are concerned about talking about body shape. This is now an important phenomenon for them to judge others by their body. It happens in almost all places: schools, colleges, universities, work places and even also in people's own homes. Media and also some books objectified the beautiful body image and policed a standard of beauty in the media, newspapers and books. Some books for children even send messages about the importance of body appearance and media is often used to target children in this way. This effects their interpersonal behaviour and communication. Many video games also tend to judge the body which is not attractive to be evil, ugly and also unsocial.

In Bangladesh, a student from Ideal School and College's Banasree Wing faced continuous bullying for his weight from other students and teachers. He was overweight at 93kg. He started to eat less and lost 33 kg in weight. However, he then faced physical changes like weakness and swollen ankles. He was physically sick for a long time and he also suffered from mental illness. His sleeping, eating and behaviour were all changed. Subsequently he was taken to hospital where he said that he was afraid to eat because of gaining weight and then his school will be angry with him. He could not eat much. After eating, he vomited. He lost weight by maintaining a well-known diet for weight loss available on the internet and his weight dropped to 29kg. He was supervised and given special treatment but he nevertheless died on June 26th, 2021. The BBC said that school and other institutions are continuing to bully students for weight, height and body appearance (Bdnews24.com, 2021). Another preparatory school, Mohammadpur in Dhaka, provides a rule that children not of standard weight and height children cannot be admitted to the school. This is discrimination against children. Authorities claim that overweight children are naughtier than others. They break the rules and disturb other students. Principal Belayet Hossain told Prothom Alo, one of the renowned newspapers in Bangladesh that their goal is to create a healthy environment in which they do not take these children (Akhter, n.d.). Also, in universities, students face body shaming. Sometimes they get depressed and avoid social interaction. In 2019, in India, a 21 year-old woman committed suicide because of her husband's constant harassment of her for her dark skin. There are many cases like this where women have committed suicide because of skin tone shaming. In 2018, a young girl committed suicide because of classmates bullying her about her dark skin (Pandey, 2019).

Body shaming happens in almost all societies. However, most of the time people do not consider it to be a serious issue. Teo *et al.* (2017) claimed body shaming to be a form of verbal bullying. From the research of neurologists and psychologists, it is found that body shaming can create psychological problems. The after effects of body shaming can include anxiety and depression in severe cases (Brewis & Bruening, 2018). Body shaming also create stress, vulnerability and fragility, feelings of inferiority and, sometimes, anti-social disorders (Thahir, 2015).

University students are among the most serious sufferers in this context. Body shaming has become a severe phenomenon in society. This study has tried to explore the effects of body shaming on the behaviour of students from different public and private universities in Dhaka. In this paper, section 1 includes the introduction where background, objectives of the study and operational definition are found; section 2 includes the literature review; section 3 concerns the methodology employed; section 4 features the findings; section 5 has the discussion; section 6 is the conclusion, where limitations and recommendations are found and, finally, section has the references.

1.2. Objectives of the Study

To explore the effects of body shaming on an individual's self-image.

To find out the effects of body shaming on an individual's interpersonal and social behaviour.

To identify how victims of body shaming cope with the body shaming experience.

1.3. Operational Definition

Body Shaming: body shaming is a feeling of shame which occurs when an individual is judged by people not to fulfill their expectations in terms of physical appearance (Damanik, 2018). Generally, body shaming is considered as an expression of bullying or mockery about someone else's bodily appearance.

Fauzia and Rahmijaji (2019) categorises body shaming in four types: fat shaming, skinny shaming, body hair shaming, and skin tone shaming. When someone hurts someone else by using negative words

describing him or her as fat, this is known as fat shaming. The second category is skinny shaming which occurs when someone criticises others for having too thin an appearance. The third one is body hair shaming which refers to the action of someone insulting others for having more hair on their bodies. The last type is skin tone shaming. This body shaming occurs when someone criticises someone else for having a different skin tone. The categories of body shaming are not limited to these four types. There are also many categories of body shaming. Height shaming, shaming of less hair, appearance shaming and masculinity shaming are other examples. In conclusion, body shaming is when people cannot fulfil the beauty standards of any body part and they are shamed for this physical characteristic by other people.

Behaviour: behaviour is considered to be how someone acts. It may be in a private place or a public place. It refers to a reaction to things that are happening: internally - thoughts and feelings - and externally - the environment, as well as other people.

Self-Image: self-image refers to the personal view or an “internal perception” that defines the characteristics of the self, considering such things as intelligence, beauty, ugliness, talent, selfishness and kindness.

Inter Personal Behaviour: inter personal behaviour refers to when people communicate with others who are close to them, for example their family members, peer groups and so forth.

Social Behaviour: social behaviour refers to when a person is communicating and interacting with other members of society.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Bullying

Sugiati (2019) discussed the influences of body shaming on behavioral pattern of FISIP Airlangga University students. He claimed the term body shaming is related to the globalization era. According to Sugiati (2019), body shaming itself has a meaning as a physical assessment of someone who generally makes negative comments and the person will feel shameful for their body appearance. Most of the respondents of his research take body shaming as a joke and they consider it normal because they have no intention to hurt other people. Sugiati (2019) did not find serious impact on FISIP Airlangga University students. However, in this paper, respondents not only take body shaming as a joke, but also said that the people who perform body shaming behaviour feel themselves superior to others. Several kinds of bullying and abusive behaviours are discussed in this paper.

2.2. Gender Differences

Gam *et al.* (2020) observed in their paper that boys having below normal body mass index (BMI) had to face mocking and harassing behaviour more than other boys. But girls had to face harassing behaviour for having above average BMI. This paper adds not only skinny shaming but also other body shaming behaviours faced by both male and female respondents.

Bullying behaviour is found in both male and female persons but it is influenced by socialization processes and not because of the differences in physical appearance (Nanda, Banerjee & Verma, 2020). Hidayat, Malfasari and Herniyanti (2019) claimed that female persons get more body shaming treatment (64.1%) than male persons (35.9%). It was found that women are more vulnerable for body shaming. But this paper finds out that in some specific body shaming cases, males get more mocking behaviour than females do.

2.3. Effects of Body Shaming

Body shaming is considered as appearance-based harassment and can be described as the the act of humiliating or mocking someone because of their physical appearance. Body shaming can lead the victim to low self-esteem, low body satisfaction and depressive symptoms that have harmful effects on young people. It was found that body shaming can affect both psychological and physical health. It also disrupts the immune system (Gam *et al.*, 2020). But this paper adds not only the effects of body shaming on physical health but also how these led to changes in social behaviour. This paper also adds the effects of body shaming on victim's own self and analyses the effects through Cooley's Looking Glass Self-theory (1902).

2.4. Role of Social Media

Social networking sites play a part in creating and increasing body shaming behaviour. Various social networking sites where neighbours, peer groups, colleagues and also other people can communicate with each other. Through comments to each other they can take important roles in creating body image expectations and thus can become involved in body shaming (de Vries *et al.*, 2016). But this study finds some positive roles for social media and other technologies through which people have got positive feelings about their body image. While it was found that from various documents and videos people get positive attitude about their body image, other people are talking against body shaming in various social media such as Facebook, Instagram and others.

2.5. Possible Solutions

Barnes (2021) described some strategies to cope with shaming and seeing one's own body positively. These included body mindset movement, body positivity, body acceptance and body neutrality, which are terms for avoiding self-body shaming. Body positivity refers to loving one's own body truly. Body acceptance means respecting one's body. Body neutrality refers to have neutral feeling about the body and realising that all bodies are different. To promote positive thinking, body movement thinking can be useful for the victims of body shaming (Barnes, 2021). This paper finds some ways to create body positivity and how to grow confidence.

2.6. Theoretical Framework

The Looking Glass Self theory (Cooley, 1902) can be used in the field of body shaming study. This theory is that a reflection of what we think or we perceive that we appear in front of other members of society is dependent on how they have viewed us. Cooley explained the socialization process in this theory. He examined that self-identity and the sense of self are not grown through the thoughts of oneself alone. It also comes from the perceptions of and examination by other members of society's viewpoints. In this issue, social interaction and communication play an important role in self-identification process.

An individual is influenced by social interaction and takes it as a mirror to observe his or her own worth, values and behaviour. This happens in three phases. First, individuals consider how he or she has to present oneself to others, whether it be family, friends or any other person. Second, individuals consider how she or he can be evaluated by other's observations. For example, an individual may be examined as being intelligent, funny or cunning. Third, an individual's self- development depends on the basis of these judgements by others (Cooley, 1902).

Cooley explored how the observation of others towards oneself is not solely responsible for developing self-identity, although it helps to influence the development of self-image. These perceptions and comments of others may be correct or incorrect. However, the individual is always trying to join the internal feeling with the external perception of others (Cooley, 1902).

3. Methodology

This study is based on a qualitative research method. As it is related with social phenomena and with the experience of body shaming, so it was determined that a qualitative research method to collect and analyze data would be appropriate.

3.1. Sources of Data

Both primary and secondary data are used. For primary data, the researcher has talked with respondents. For secondary data, the researcher has used online newspapers, research articles, books, documents, reports, seminar papers and other available sources on the internet.

3.2 Study Area and Study Population

Data was collected from different public and private university students (20 males, 20 females) in Dhaka city. They all are around 20-24 years old.

3.3. Sampling Technique

As this study is based on the victims of body shaming, a purposive sampling method is used to pick respondents. Respondents who can fulfill the research criteria are invited to participate in this study.

3.4. Data Collection Procedure

Data was collected through in-depth-interviews. Since this is a sensitive issue and people are emotional about their experiences of body shaming, the researcher needed to explore the depth data and experience of the victims with sensitivity and according to ethical standards.

An organized checklist and a dairy were used for this study. Also, a mobile phone for recording and some digital instruments have been used in the research. Networks with university students helped in collecting data and they talked freely, sharing their experience. With the permission of the respondents, the data have been noted and recorded on a confidential basis.

3.5. Data Processing and Analysis

After taking all interviews, researcher transcribed all the information from the recordings. As all interviews were conducted in the Bengali language, these were transcribed in an organized way deducting the unnecessary information. Subsequently, these were translated into the English language. The researcher did not include the original names of the respondents or any identifiable information for maintaining anonymity.

The researcher has analyzed the data through content analysis to determine the themes that fulfil the objectives of the study.

4. Results

4.1. Respondents' Perceptions about Body Shaming

Most of the respondents explained that body shaming is a humiliating activity concerning another person's body appearance. Some of the respondents said that body shaming is an act to judge others by their body shape. It happens when people throw comments to others for their weight, skinny body appearance, short height or dark skin tone. They spoke of body shaming with terms such as mocking, trolling or bullying. One of the respondents explained that body shaming is a way of making one person feel superior to another.

Another respondent said that members of society perceive that there should be a standard body appearance and that should be maintained by everyone. It is an idealistic perception of society.

Respondents explained that weight shaming, skinny shaming, height shaming, hair shaming are included in body shaming. Some of them added that they also faced body shaming because of the size of their breasts, hips and nose.

Some people have faced weight shaming for having more weight than others. They have randomly heard these words, for instance:

“How much do you eat a day?”

“Which rice do you eat?”

“You should wear a loose dress.”

They have been compared with pregnant women and people have mocked them by saying that:

“In which month are you due?”

Skinny shaming is used against some people who have less weight than others. Both male and female respondents have faced skinny shaming. This is totally opposite attitude from weight shaming. They have heard the opposite comments from the comments of weight shaming. For instance:

“You look like a stick!”

“Doesn't your mother give you any food?”

“This dress does not suit you.”

The male respondents who have faced skinny shaming said that they even been asked:

“Do you take drugs?”

Female respondents have been compared with other girls in a way that questions their femininity.

In this study female respondents have faced skin tone shaming more than male respondents have. They have been criticized by others for their dark skin. The people involved regularly compare them with other girls who have whiter skin tones. They have heard comments such as:

“Who will marry you?”

“Drink *haldi* milk every night to become whiter.”

“Do not wear this dark colour dress, it does not suit you.”

Height shaming is another type of body shaming where people mock others for having less height than the height standard perceived by society. The victims of height shaming are mostly male respondents. They have heard such comments as:

“Short boys have no market value.”

“Girls do not like short boys as their husbands.”

“You look like a baby.”

Hair shaming happens when people are mocked for having more hair on their body. Some of the female respondents of this study have faced this type of body shaming. They are threatened that they will not be able to marry and are told to use herbal medicine to remove the hair. Another form of hair shaming happens when people have less hair on their head. This type of shaming is mostly faced by male respondents. They have heard various forms of mockery from others:

“You look older than us.”

“No one will be ready to be your girlfriend.”

“Wear a cap.”

There is another type of body shaming some of the female respondents have faced, which is body shaming resulting from the size of their breasts. They have heard comments such as:

“Wear a large dupatta.”

“Does anyone touch your breasts [to make them bigger]?”

“Do you have asthma?”

Most of the respondents of this study said that they have experienced body shaming from childhood. As people were more sensitive in childhood, they were more vulnerable in that period. Most of the victims said that they face body shaming by neighbours and relatives more than from unknown people. Peer group and family members are also perpetrators.

Most of the respondents agreed that they felt hurt more when peer groups or other people close to them tried to mock them for their body appearance than when other people did. This is because peer groups are the people from whom they expect support and good behaviour so it is more hurtful when they do it. Strangers are people who they will not meet again most of the time so their comments are less damaging.

4.1. Victim’s Interpersonal and Social Behaviour with Other Members of Society

This study has found different categories of body shaming victims and each of them has experienced a particular type of body shaming. Most of the respondents said they are more comfortable to talk with close friends and family rather than relatives, neighbours and other people. As the close people are supportive, they can interact frankly with them. But when close friends mock them for their body appearance, it is more hurtful. Some of the respondents have experienced body shaming by their peer group and after that they cannot easily mix with them and said that they trying to stay on their own.

To communicate with relatives and neighbours and attend a function are not easy tasks for the victims. They added that they try to avoid to joining social gatherings and if they did have to attend, then they would feel uncomfortable the whole time. Relatives and other people are always ready to talk about their body appearance. Even some of the respondents who live away from the family home did not always feel ready to visit their parents.

4.2. Inequality Faced by the Victims of Body Shaming

Most of the respondents said that they have faced some inequality because of their body appearance. Respondents of skinny shaming shared that in school teachers always did not let them take part in displays. The teachers directly cut them and said that you do not look beautiful when moving your body in a display. Also, some respondents who have faced weight shaming during school said that their teachers cut them out from scouting as they were, they said, too heavy.

Another respondent added that while at college, one of the teachers asked questions to a particular student as she had white skin tone. However, the victim was not asked questions by the teacher because of having dark skin tone.

One respondent who has faced weight shaming said that she has started photography because she did not like to see her own appearance in a photograph, so she wanted to stay behind the camera. But in her photographic journey, she has faced some inequality. When two or more than two photographers have been asked to record an event, she was avoided by the guests. The guests had a tendency to stand in front of the photographers who looked best to them.

In job interviews, male respondents of height shaming have faced inequality. Though they had ability and fulfilled the requirements for the post applied for, they were rejected because of height. Also, a male victim of skinny shaming said he was rejected from a radio station because of his appearance. He was asked to take a drugs test.

4.2. Strategies Followed by Victims after Facing Body Shaming

All of the respondents have followed some strategies in a particular period of their lives. The victims of weight shaming have tried exercise and maintained a strict diet. In some cases, they have taken medicine to lose weight. However, some respondents said that because of these diets they have fallen sick, suffered from gastric problems and other medical conditions. The victims of skinny shaming said that they have taken protein shakes on a daily basis. They have tried to eat meals more than their capacity to do so and, because of this, they have suffered from vomiting and eating disorder problem. Some respondents said that they do not like ghee, butter and sweet items but nowadays they are trying to eat these foods to gain weight. One of the male respondents of skinny shaming said that he has tried to maintain going to the gym for increasing his musculature and has tried to eat a large portion of chicken and protein shakes daily. Some of them have taken medicine for gaining weight. Victims of skin tone shaming said that they have used various types of herbal products and beauty products to make their skin whiten. Some of the respondents who have large breast said that they have used tight inner dresses and done exercises. Respondents of height shaming said they have tried to do exercises, such as cycling. Other respondents who have less hair on their head tried to wear caps and have also used some herbal products. A female respondent with a lot of hair on her body has used medicine to remove the hair. However, they all said that they have followed these strategies only because of being body shamed by other people. They felt insecure.

Nowadays, they have not tried too much to adhere to the standard of body shape because they have started to love their bodies. Their confidence and self-respect have increased from what they had been previously. Some of them said that they are maintaining some exercises to keep themselves healthy, while others cannot escape from insecure feelings and keep trying to make themselves look beautiful to others.

The victims of body shaming have faced crucial experience at a particular period of their lives. Some have faced it while at school, others while at college period and some are still suffering at the moment. Some respondents said that they have grown more confident about their own bodies. Their self-respect has developed when they came out from their houses and tried to discover the world. They have got motivation from celebrities; for instance, one respondent was motivated by Khloé Kardashian who also faced fat shaming and stood up for the victims (Ritschel, 2021). One of the victims of skin tone and weight shaming

explained that she was motivated by Robyn Rihanna Fenty, who is a Barbadian singer, actor and businesswoman. In an interview, Rihanna shared her experience of body shaming online and she explained that she loves her own self whatever her size or how she looks. She always tries to keep a sense of body positivity in herself (Lang, 2018). This example helps the respondent to cope with the experience of body shaming. Her self-love and confidence have grown and she explained:

“In the present world, confidence is the real beauty, not the body appearance.”

Another respondent said that after exploring documents and visiting various places she felt that there are not only her but also many other people like her with different sizes and body structures. It is not that there is a given body standard in society that is considered beautiful but she thinks that every person has his or her own beauty. She added that now she can perceive that she is not a plate of biriyani to please others with her body appearance. If one feels satisfied with his or her own body shape, then that will be okay. Some respondents said that they still cannot cope with the experience of body shaming. They just try to forget the experience.

5. Discussion

This portion of the paper explores the data that obtained from the in-depth interviews, which is analysed in the context of Cooley's (1902) Looking Glass Self-Theory. It also discusses some possible means of remedying the body shaming behaviour.

5.1. The Attitude of Body Shaming Behaviour of Others Affects the Self of the Victim: Looking Glass Self-Theory

When an individual is judged by others for his or her body shape, she or he may feel demotivated and regretful about their own body appearance. This person can assume the judgement of others is the right way to think about their own body image. When a person has heard from others about his or her fatness or thinness; height or skin tone, he or she may feel insecure about their body. According to Cooley's looking glass self-theory, it is because the victim of body shaming takes the external attitude of others with his or her own inner feeling. It may affect his or her behaviour. The victim of body shaming may lose self-esteem and confidence. They try to avoid interaction with others sometimes.

Most of the respondents said that they have felt not completed with their body appearance because of the body shaming attitude of others. They felt that they cannot achieve the required beauty standards and so they are not suitable in this society. Some feel so low when in front of others. They think their bodies are a curse. Because of body shaming, most of the respondents have faced depression, anxiety and some respondents have even thought about suicide. One of the female respondents who has faced body shaming for having large breasts said that in her teenage years she tried to cut them with a knife.

Their experiences are related with Cooley's looking glass self-theory in which an individual tries to look at their own self through other's viewpoint. Members of society play the role of a mirror. The victims of body shaming have also faced low self-esteem because of other peoples' perceptions. They have felt insecurity and incomplete because other people judged them. One of the respondents said that he has joined a gym because of people make fun of his body. He did not join it by his own choice. Society forced him to lose weight.

5.2. Some Possible Means of Remedying Body Shaming Behaviour

Several suggestions came from the respondents as possible means of remedying body shaming behaviour. Some said that it is high time to take steps to overcome the experience of body shaming. One of the

respondents explained that self-love is necessary at any stage and it may come from the motivational videos or from the life styles of a particular celebrity or model. Another suggested that the victim has to grow confidence in every aspect of his or her body appearance. The individual has to believe that confidence is the real beauty whatever you wear or how much your weight is. Some suggested that university authorities may organize effective seminars against the body shaming attitude; several animation posters and short videos can be included to persuade the people who body shame others not to do so. These videos may include the theme of anti-body shaming attitude. Lastly, all respondents agreed that they need their family's support. Those who got the support suffer less than the others who did not.

5. Conclusion

This paper explores the effects of body shaming on the behaviour of students from different public and private universities in Dhaka from a micro perspective. The study has employed a qualitative methodology and has gathered data from multiple secondary sources. It shows that how body shaming affects an individual's own self: the victims of body shaming do not feel confident and this behaviour has created a negative perception of one's own body appearance. Some victims have even tried to harm themselves because of facing body shaming. The victims mostly avoid social gatherings. Some of them quit their favourite activities because of body shaming. Because of body shaming, the victims took medicines and herbal treatments and went to the gym to try to fulfil the societal standard of body image. They do not want to hear any more about their body appearance.

In the modern world, people are more conscious of body shaming. Those who were once so broken about their own body appearance because of body shaming have responded with body positivity and how they got motivation from various documents and models. Several suggestions for remedying the body shaming behaviour have come from the respondents.

5.1. Limitations and Recommendations

A qualitative research method is used in this study. In-depth-interviews were conducted for collecting primary data. It is not actually based on a quantitative method which can generate a large amount of data. The researcher cannot obtain a larger number of respondents' interviews because of time constraints. So, it is quite difficult to generalize the experience of body shaming from these forty in-depth-interviews. This paper only discussed the experiences of university students who have faced body shaming. People in other age groups are not included in this study. In this paper, gender differences are not included as a main objective. It can be discussed in further research. This paper is beneficial for readers and authors interested in body shaming, effects of body shaming and the strategies followed by the victims of body shaming.

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