

The Relationship of Body Shaming with Self-Esteem and Psychological Distress in Adolescents: A Comparative Study

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Abstract

Adolescence is a crucial stage of development during which the individuals become more aware of their body image and are often more sensitive to comments about their appearance. The present study examined the relationship between body shaming, self-esteem and psychological distress among adolescents. The study also explored gender differences and compared adolescents from government and private schools. The sample consisted of 100 adolescents, including 50 males and 50 females, selected from government and private schools. Standardized psychological scales were used to measure body shaming, self-esteem and psychological distress. The data were analyzed using Pearson's correlation and Independent samples t-test was used to study gender differences. The results showed a significant negative relationship between body shaming and self-esteem and a positive relationship between body shaming and psychological distress among adolescents. However, the t-test results showed no significant difference between males and females or between government and private school students. The findings highlight the need for greater awareness and intervention to address body shaming and foster positive body image among adolescents.

Keywords: Adolescents, Body Shaming, Self-Esteem, Psychological Distress.

1. Introduction

Adolescence is a critical developmental stage characterized by significant physical, psychological, and social changes. The World Health Organization (WHO) defines adolescents as individuals between the ages of 10 and 19 years (World Health Organization, 2024). During adolescence, individuals undergo a number of changes in their physical development as well as their socio-emotional well-being. These somatic changes may cause teenagers to feel less confident about their physical appearance and become more self-conscious about how they look. As a result, adolescents often pay greater attention to their outward appearance, and body image has been found to be significantly associated with self-esteem among late adolescents (Solistiawati & Sitasari, 2015).

Adolescence is a developmental stage in which individuals tend to interact more actively with their social cohorts. Increased peer interaction can sometimes give rise to new challenges, as adolescents may use physical appearance as a basis for teasing or ridicule when someone does not conform to societal ideals of attractiveness (Widiasti, 2016). Such behaviour is referred to as body shaming, which involves

criticizing or mocking another person's physical appearance, including their weight, skin colour, body shape or stature (Rahayu & Tandyonomanu, 2019). In adolescence, this phenomenon is frequently observed. Whether it originates from peers or other individuals, body shaming can happen in cyberspace through social media or in real-life interactions. Individuals who are targeted by such behavior often have trouble accepting their own physical appearance. Victims of body shaming inevitably exhibit diminished self-acceptance, where self-acceptance is closely intertwined with the acceptance of one's physical appearance (Ridha, 2012).

Additionally, during their formative years, the intensifying influence of social media personalities and the constant endorsement of an idealized appearance have led adolescents to become increasingly occupied with the belief in the 'perfect body'. Eisenberg et al. (2003) highlights that individuals who are unable to align with societal beauty standards often face criticism from their surroundings based on their outer look. Furthermore, such pressures from society can cultivate unrealistic body expectations among adolescents, which in addition influence their self-perception and how they perceive others. This, in turn, may contribute to the mockery of young individuals who do not adhere to prevailing cultural standards. Therefore, we can say that Body shaming involves making negative comments about a person's body. This behavior can be self-directed or aimed at others. Such criticism can focus on a variety of physical features including a person's size, age, hair, clothes, eating habits, hair, or perceived attractiveness. (Deviantony et al., 2024). According to Oktaviani (2019), Self-esteem is an individual evaluation of oneself by acknowledging one's own skills and comparing these against the recognition and acceptance provided by others. Self-esteem often declines during adolescence, as teenagers perceive that their body shape does not meet ideal standards and that they do not possess the attributes which can act as social capital in their peer group (Syafrizaldi & Pratiwi, 2020). As described by Rosenberg (1965), Self-esteem represents the self-evaluation of an individual, marked by a combination of positive and negative views as valuable. Individuals with high Self-esteem tend to experience increased happiness and demonstrate enhanced confidence and effectiveness in their interactions with the world. Alternatively, individuals with low self-esteem are highly influenced by external perceptions, which erode their confidence, amplify pessimism, and negatively impact their social interactions by increasing stress (Meszaros & De Wals, 2011).

Psychological distress is a condition marked by emotional turmoil, frequently accompanied by symptoms of anxiety and depression. It not only affects the emotional well-being of an individual but can also cause physical symptoms such as headaches, sleep issues, and fatigue (Belay et al., 2021). Exposure to body shaming can trigger mental health conditions like eating disorders and depression. It doesn't matter whether the shaming is directed at us personally or someone else; this toxic shaming can lead to mental health issues by fostering insecurity, spurring unhealthy behaviors, and strengthening the notion that our self-worth depends on our appearance. Furthermore, it is associated with an increased risk of developing eating disorders, depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, and body dysmorphia, alongside a general feeling of repulsion towards one's body. Adolescents who experience body shaming are at a higher risk of developing depression, eating disorders, and negative self-perception, which ultimately contributes to diminished self-esteem (Brewis & Bruening, 2018; Cerolini et al., 2024; Van Den Berg et al., 2010).

2. Review of Literature

Body image concerns and experiences of body shaming have increasingly become important topics of research in adolescent psychology. Numerous studies have explored how body shaming influences adolescents' self-perception, emotional well-being, and psychological adjustment. Cerolini et al. (2024) conducted a study among Italian teenagers to find out how common Body Shaming is and how it affects them psychologically, especially when it comes from peers and family. The study included 919 teenagers (average age about 16), and it revealed that almost 37% of students had experienced shame about their body at least once. One of the four said that it came from either peers or family. The study showed that teens who faced shame about their bodies, especially girls, had more signs of eating problems and were dissatisfied with their bodies and even felt more judged by others and themselves in respect to their weight. Importantly, for overweight teens, feeling ashamed of their own weight explained the partial link between family body shaming and eating problems. These findings show that body shaming can seriously harm teenagers psychologically. Moreover, it suggests that both friends as well as family members have a great impact on how teens feel about their bodies.

Deviantony et al. (2024) conducted a mixed-method study to understand the psychological effects of body shaming among teenagers of Indonesia and to explore strategies for its prevention. A cross-sectional research design was used. The study involved 320 junior high school students between the ages of 12 and 15 years. The findings revealed that body shaming was highly prevalent among the participants. Many students reported being criticized for their clothing (73.1%), the way they talked (59.9%), and being compared to others (66.7%). The main sources of body shaming were family, their friends, the media, and the student's own insecurities. Miyairi and Reel (2016) explored how common the different types of bullying are, especially verbal teasing, in order to see their impact on how someone feels about their body and self-esteem. For this study, a cross-sectional survey of 143 seventh-grade students was conducted, and it was found that over half (52.8%) had been bullied in the past month. Verbal bullying was found to be the most common subcategory, with around 46.5%. The study also found that teasing about someone's abilities, such as how smart they are, was even more commonly found and was more troubling than teasing about weight. This indicated that in early adolescence, bullying is not just limited to appearance.

Asl et al. (2022) investigated how self-esteem and belief in one's abilities influence the link between having high standards, being emotionally sensitive and disordered eating habits in university students. The study was carried out with 302 students from the University of Tehran. It found that being a perfectionist and reacting strongly to negative emotions were linked to higher chances of having an eating disorder. But it was evaluated that students who have higher self-esteem and belief in their own abilities could help prevent students from developing any unhealthy eating behaviors, especially those who have overly high expectations or are easily affected by emotions. Saxena et al. (2020) examined the relationship between body shaming, body image, life orientation, and emotional expression and how these factors influence personality. The study included 150 participants (75 males and 75 females). The findings showed no significant relationship between body image and emotional expression; however, a positive association was found between body satisfaction and emotional expressivity, indicating that individuals who feel better about their bodies tend to express their emotions more openly. Interestingly, positive body perception did not necessarily correspond to a positive outlook on life. These findings

suggest that while body satisfaction may enhance emotional expression, it does not automatically ensure a more optimistic life orientation, highlighting the complex role of body image in psychological functioning.

Ganesan et al. (2018) conducted a study on adolescent girls of Coimbatore, India, to examine body image dissatisfaction and its associated factors. The study included 1,220 participants and found that 77.6% of the adolescents were dissatisfied with their body image. Such dissatisfaction, often intensified by experiences of body shaming, can also lead to various physical consequences, including trouble sleeping, frequent headaches, stomach discomfort and persistent muscle tension (Miyairi & Reel, 2016). Thus, it becomes essential to study this issue in order to better understand the psychological and physical consequences of body shaming among adolescents. Examining this phenomenon can help in identifying its impact on self-esteem, body image, and overall well-being, and can also contribute to the development of effective awareness, prevention, and intervention strategies.

3. Method

3.1 Objectives

1. To study the relationship between body shaming and self-esteem among adolescent males and females.
2. To study the relationship between body shaming and psychological distress among adolescent males and females.
3. To study the correlation between body shaming, self-esteem, and psychological distress among males and females and in students from government and private schools.
4. To study the differences in body shaming, self-esteem, and psychological distress between males and females and also in students from government and private schools.

3.2 Hypotheses

- H1: There will be a significant negative correlation between body shaming and self-esteem among adolescents.
- H2: There will be a significant positive correlation between body shaming and psychological distress among adolescents.
- H3: Body shaming will be positively correlated with psychological distress and negatively correlated with self-esteem among both government and private school students.
- H4: There will be a significant gender difference in body shaming, self-esteem and psychological distress among adolescents.
- H5: There will be a significant difference in body shaming, self-esteem and psychological distress between adolescents studying in government and private schools.

3.3 Sample

The subjects selected for the study comprised 100 adolescents, including 50 males and 50 females from the different schools of Amritsar city, ranging from 15-18 years of age. The sample was drawn from both private and government school students. The study aimed to ensure that there is an equal representation of gender to enable comparative analysis.

3.4 Data and Sources of Data

The primary data was collected using standardized psychological questionnaires. Subjects completed the questionnaires voluntarily after providing informed consent and the confidentiality of their responses was ensured. The data collected from the subjects were used for statistical analysis, including descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, and t-tests, to examine the relationships and differences among the variables.

3.5 Instruments Used

Standardized psychological instruments were implemented in the present study to assess body shaming, self-esteem and psychological distress among adolescents. Body shaming was measured using the Objectified Body Consciousness Scale (OBCS) developed by McKinley and Hyde (1996). The scale is comprised of 24 items categorized into three distinct subscales, with eight items per subscale. Responses are recorded on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1, which indicates strongly disagree and 7, which indicates strongly agree. The OBCS has high reliability and validity, with internal consistency coefficient ranging from 0.75 to 0.79 for the body shame subscale.

For Self-Esteem, the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES) was used which was developed by Rosenberg (1965). In this scale, there are 10 items in total, half of which are positively worded and the other half negatively worded. Subjects respond to the scale using a 4-point Likert scale, with options ranging from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree".

The Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (K10) was used to measure psychological distress among adolescents. The scale was developed by Kessler et al. (2002). The K10 consists of 10 items that are designed to assess anxiety and depression related symptoms, including feelings of nervousness, hopelessness, restlessness, sadness, and worthlessness. Subjects respond to ten items, using a 5-point scale where 1 corresponds to 'none of the time' and 5 corresponds to 'all of the time'. It is widely used in population health surveys, clinical settings, and research studies. This scale exhibits high reliability and validity across different populations and settings, with Cronbach's alpha equal to 0.88, signifying strong scale reliability (Easton et al., 2017).

4. Data Analyses

For analyzing the data, an independent sample t-test was employed to compare gender differences in body shaming, self-esteem, and psychological distress. Furthermore, Pearson's product-moment correlation was used to measure the relationship between body shaming, self-esteem, and psychological distress. This allowed the researchers to determine the strength and direction of association between the three variables. All the analysis of data was carried out by using the SPSS version 20.0. All the statistical tests conducted were two-tailed, and the level of significance was set at $p < 0.05$ in order to test the hypotheses.

5. Results and Discussion

Table 1: Descriptive statistics, Range, Mean, S.D., Skewness and Kurtosis for Body Shaming, Self-Esteem and Psychological Distress (N=100)

Variables	N	Range	Min.	Max.	Mean	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis
Body Shaming	100	53.00	55.00	108.00	88.15	11.52	-1.116	1.066
Self-Esteem	100	18.00	8.00	26.00	17.35	3.71	-0.053	-0.625
Psychological Distress	100	23.00	12.00	35.00	22.79	5.48	-0.282	-0.608

For body shaming, the mean score obtained was 88.15 (SD=11.52), suggesting that a high level of body shaming was perceived by the sample. The skewness value obtained was -1.116, which suggests a negatively skewed distribution. It signifies that a larger number of participants scored higher in body shaming. The kurtosis value obtained was 1.066, which represents a leptokurtic distribution. For self-esteem, the mean score obtained was 17.35 (SD=3.71), suggesting that a moderate level of self-esteem was perceived by the sample. The skewness value obtained was -0.053, which suggests the data is nearly symmetric as the value is very close to 0. The kurtosis value obtained was -0.608 that is negative, which reflects a platykurtic distribution. For psychological distress, the mean score obtained was 22.79 (SD=5.48). The skewness value obtained was -0.282, which suggests the data is slightly negatively skewed. A few participants have higher distress scores. The kurtosis value obtained was -0.608, which reflects a platykurtic distribution. Overall, all skewness and kurtosis values obtained fall within the acceptable range of ± 2 , indicating that the data for all three variables are approximately normally distributed. Therefore, the data is considered suitable for the application of parametric statistical techniques.

Table 2: Means, Standard deviations and t-values for Females (n=50) and Males (n=50) on Body

Variables	Gender	N	Mean	Standard Deviation	t-value
Body Shaming	Female	50	87.78	13.549	0.320
	Male	50	88.52	9.192	
Self-Esteem	Female	50	17.20	3.796	0.402
	Male	50	17.50	3.660	
Psychological Distress	Female	50	23.16	5.676	-0.673
	Male	50	22.42	5.315	

Shaming, Self-Esteem and Psychological Distress.

The independent sample t-test was used in order to evaluate whether gender differences exist in these variables. For body shaming, the mean score obtained for females and males was 87.78 and 87.52, respectively, which are quite similar. The t-value obtained was 0.320, which is not statistically significant. This indicates that there was no significant difference between females and males in their experiences of body shaming. For self-esteem, the mean score obtained for females and males was 17.20 and 17.50, respectively, and the t-value obtained was 0.402, which suggests a non-significant difference. This indicates that gender does not significantly impact self-esteem. For psychological distress, the mean score obtained for females and males was 23.16 and 23.43, respectively, and the t-value obtained was -0.673, which suggests that the difference was not statistically significant. Overall, the results show that gender does not have a significant influence on body shaming, self-esteem or psychological distress among adolescents. This result is supported by Van den Berg et al. (2010), who conducted a large-scale longitudinal study to see how being unhappy with their look and low self-esteem are connected. Their study showed that being uncomfortable with one's appearance was strongly associated with low self-esteem in both boys and girls, and no significant difference was found based on age and gender. While there are several studies which show that societal standards influence both females and males differently (Humphrey & Paxton, 2004)

Although society often has different viewpoints and expectations for males and females, this study found that there is no significant difference; that is, both genders face similar challenges when it comes to issues like body shaming, self-esteem, and psychological distress. One of the reasons for this could be that both genders are influenced by similar societal pressures. These pressures may arise from certain sources like social media, peer groups, and cultural norms. Today, both genders are exposed to the same beauty standards and certain expectations from society.

Traditionally, it was seen that society had different perspectives about masculinity and femininity, and these ideas have shaped how both genders perceive their bodies. For girls, being teased by both sources was strongly linked to binge eating, constant dieting, feeling bad about their bodies, eating to cope up with emotions, and using unhealthy ways to control their weight. For boys, only teasing from peers demonstrated similar long-term problems (Puhl et al., 2017). It has been observed that the gap between gender experiences seems to be shrinking. This could be because both genders are exposed to the same media, where beauty ideals and societal expectations are shown similarly. Since this study found no significant differences between genders, it opens up possibilities for future researchers to explore.

Table 3: Correlation between Body Shaming, Self-Esteem and Psychological Distress among Females (n=50) and Males (n=50)

Variables	Gender	Body Shaming	Self-Esteem	Psychological Distress
Body Shaming	Female	1	-0.623**	0.649**
	Male	1	-0.284*	0.346*
Self-Esteem	Female	-0.623**	1	-0.557**
	Male	-0.284*	1	-0.431**
Psychological Distress	Female	0.649**	-0.557**	1
	Male	0.346*	-0.431**	1

**Value significant at 0.01 level

*Value significant at 0.05 level

The correlation analysis shows that females experience a stronger association between body shaming, self-esteem and psychological distress compared to males. In females, body shaming was strongly positively correlated with psychological distress and negatively correlated with self-esteem ($r = 0.649, p < 0.01$). This suggests that when experiences of body shaming increase, feelings of distress also increase, and self-esteem decreases ($r = -0.623, p < 0.01$). On the other hand, males showed relatively weaker correlations. Body shaming also affects males; that is, when they experience body shaming, psychological distress increases, and self-esteem decreases ($r = 0.346$ and $r = -0.284$), but it is less pronounced than in females. This supports the results of Syeda et al. (2023), who found that body shaming has a strong negative effect on self-esteem, suggesting that the more the younger adults experience body-related shaming, the worse they feel about themselves. In addition to that, the study also found a strong relation between body shaming and emotional reactivity. Gender differences were also noted from the study, which suggests that females showed stronger emotional reactions to body-related shaming than males.

Table 4: Means, Standard deviations and t-ratios for Government school (n=50) and Private school students (n=50) on Body Shaming, Self-Esteem and Psychological Distress

Variables	Groups	N	Mean	Standard Deviation	t-value
Body Shaming	Government	50	88.54	13.361	0.337
	private	50	87.76	9.460	
Self-Esteem	Government	50	17.88	3.645	1.435
	Private	50	16.82	3.739	
Psychological Distress	Government	50	22.30	6.224	-0.893
	Private	50	23.28	4.638	

For Body shaming, the mean score obtained for the government and private school students was 88.54 and 87.76, respectively, which are quite similar. The t-value obtained was 0.337, which is not statistically significant. This indicates that there was no significant difference between the two groups in their experiences of body shaming. For self-esteem, the mean score obtained for the government and

private school students was 17.88 and 16.82, respectively, and the *t*-value obtained was 1.435, which suggests a non-significant difference. This indicates that school type does not have a significant impact on the self-esteem of adolescents. For psychological distress, the mean score obtained for the government and private school students was 22.30 and 23.28, respectively, and the *t*-value obtained was - 0.893, which suggests that the difference in psychological distress levels between the two school types was not statistically significant.

There is limited research that directly compares adolescents from both government and private schools in terms of how they experience body shaming, self-esteem, that is, how they feel about themselves and psychological distress, that is, how stressed or emotionally upset they feel. So, this study was done in order to find out if the type of school a student attends makes any difference. The results obtained showed that there is no statistically significant difference found between students from government and private schools. Both groups had similar experiences. This might be because of certain factors. Even though government and private schools are different from each other in terms of money, resources, or facilities, adolescents from both types of schools are still part of the same society.

Moreover, they face similar societal pressures, such as what they see on social media, what their friends say, or the stress they face doing well in school. In addition to that, nowadays most teenagers have access to phones and the internet. They all see similar beauty trends, celebrity images, and societal expectations. It does not matter which type of school they go to. This can affect how they feel about their bodies and themselves. Since this area hasn't been studied much, the study suggests that future researchers should explore how different school environments might influence adolescents' mental health and body image, especially in different cultures or countries.

Table 5: Correlation between Body Shaming, Self-Esteem and Psychological Distress among Government (n=50) and Private (n=50) schools.

Variables	Group	Body Shaming	Body Shaming	Psychological Distress
Body Shaming	Government	1	-0.542**	0.557**
	Private	1	-0.438**	0.469**
Body Shaming	Government	-0.542**	1	-0.615**
	Private	-0.438**	1	-0.345*
Psychological Distress	Government	0.557**	-0.615**	1
	Private	0.469**	-0.345*	1

**Value significant at 0.01 level

*Value significant at 0.05 level

The correlation analysis reveals clear differences between government and private school students in how body shaming impacts self-esteem and psychological distress. Among students in government schools, body shaming had a strong positive correlation with psychological distress ($r = 0.557, p < 0.01$) and a strong negative correlation with self-esteem distress ($r = - 0.542, p < 0.01$). Whereas for private school students, a similar pattern was found, that is, body shaming had a positive correlation with psychological distress ($r = 0.469, p < 0.01$) and a negative correlation with self-esteem ($r = -0.438, p <$

0.01), but the relationships were a bit weaker. It could be because many students in government schools come from lower-income families and have less awareness about body image issues and mental health. Also, activities of teasing and bullying about appearance might be more common and not taken seriously and students don't have access to support systems, such as school counselors with whom they can share their feelings. Whereas private school students may have more exposure to awareness programs, better support from their teachers and parents and these things help them deal in a better way with body shaming. Though body shaming has a harmful effect on adolescents in both school settings, whether it's government or private, students of government schools seem to be more affected.

These findings align with Gam et al. (2020), who conducted the study across four schools in Lucknow and observed that the type of school might also affect how often students are teased about their looks. The study suggested that boys in co-ed schools faced the highest body shaming, while girls in all-girls schools faced the least. Similarly, Puhl and Luedicke (2012) found that teasing at school is closely linked to emotional struggles like sadness, depression, not liking their bodies, aggression, low self-confidence, and fear after being teased. The study also found that every time a student was teased, their chances of missing school or doing worse in school went up by 5%, no matter even after considering things like their age, gender or weight.

5. Limitations

Even though this study provided useful insights, it had some limitations. The sample size was relatively small and participants were selected only from Amritsar, which limits the generalizability of the findings to adolescents from other regions. Also, the study relied solely on quantitative methods, which may not have shown the full emotional and personal experiences of the participants. Since the data was collected through self-reports, there was a chance that some participants might have given answers that they thought were socially acceptable rather than giving honest responses. Future research can include more students from different places, and also other methods, like interviews, can be done to get deeper insights.

Future research should consider including additional contextual variables such as socio-economic status, parental attachment, peer influence, social media exposure, or cultural beauty standards, as these factors may influence or mediate the relationship between body shaming, self-esteem, and psychological distress among adolescents. Moreover, studying these variables may provide a more comprehensive understanding of the variables affecting adolescents' psychological well-being.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, the study showed that body shaming had a significant negative impact on adolescents. The results indicated that whenever the adolescents experienced body shaming, their self-esteem tended to decrease and they were more likely to feel stressed, anxious or depressed. This study also supported the idea that when individuals compared themselves to others, it affected how they felt inside, and this made them feel sad and stressed.

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