



# INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

## BODY SHAMING: CAN WE STIGMATIZE THIS?

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### INTRODUCTION

Bullying is a perennial and habitual behaviour that involves hurtful teasing or threat, or coercion on a part of one person to sharply dominate, intimidate, or abuse another. Bullying will occur among people of any age and anyplace. Those who are overweight or scraggy stand at a better risk of being cowed. This type of ordeal may be older from acquaintances, friends, teachers, or one thing as delicate as teasing reception. Once anyone could be a victim of bullying within the type of weights or appearance teasing, a negative body image can usually develop. If that individual has low self-reverence, precision, or angst, then they're usually genetically doomed to developing feeding disorders.

The consequences of bullying on the cowed person vary from person to person because the threshold for various types of bullying depends on the cowed individual and may be devastating. Bullying tends to be additional devastating on the cowed person once it happens on the idea of their appearance and appearances resulting in long physical and emotional issues, regarding the mental side of being the victim of such bullying, so creating it very laborious to beat.<sup>1</sup>

It is very vital to de-normalize such behaviour, particularly during this fashionable age of digitalisation, thus on save yourself similarly as others from being victims of such acts. In today's times, the unworthiness of this act isn't even understood thanks to the commonness of its incidence. The removal of this kind of downgrading behaviour is what would build this society a higher and a communicatively healthier place to measure in.

## I. AIMS AND OBJECTIVES OF THIS RESEARCH

- Understanding the meaning of body shaming.
- Understanding the reasons for the continued existence of body shaming in the present world, where people know of the horrors that could occur as a consequence to this act.
- Understanding if there's any way this act could be stopped from occurring.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

I had gone through a few books and research papers that spoke about body shaming. These books were: *The Body is not an Apology: The Power of Radical Self-love* (Written by Sonya Renee Taylor), *Healing your Emotional self: A Powerful Program to Help You Raise Your Self-Esteem, Quiet Your Inner Critic, and Overcome Your Shame* (Written by Beverly Engel), and *The Body and Shame: Phenomenology, Feminism, and the Socially Shaped Body* (Written by Luna Dolezal). The papers that I went through were: *The Effects of a Social-Evaluative Body Image Threat on Shame, Social Physique Anxiety, Body Dissatisfaction and Cortisol Responses in University Men* (Written by Brianne Ozimok), and *The Role of Body Shame, Social Appearance Anxiety, and Body Checking Behaviour on Body Dissatisfaction and Disordered Eating Behaviours: A Cross-Cultural Study in Germany and Korea*.

Going through all of this made me realise that each of these spoke about the consequences of body shaming and how to ignore it on a personal level. None of them spoke about what body shaming really meant and what could be the ways to stop it from occurring. This led me to think about body shaming as more than just a concept and as a presently occurring phenomenon, which in turn, led to the formation of the ideas and thoughts that have been presented in this paper.

## III. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- What is the reason for this flawed concept of flawlessness and beauty in India?
- Can the act of body shaming itself ever be stigmatized?

## IV. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Both primary as well as secondary research have been incorporated in this project.

Analysis has been done of the primary research conducted, and the secondary research used has formed an important part of this project.

## Chapter 1

### UNDERSTANDING THE MEANING OF BODY SHAMING<sup>ii</sup>

Body shaming is known as the act or practise of humiliating another solely for their physical appearance. It is considered as a form of bullying that can cause severe emotional trauma, especially at a young age. Body shaming is the criticism of oneself, or others, based on physical appearances, thus involving the passing of inappropriate, negative statements and attitudes toward another person's visible bodily appearance that doesn't conform with your standards of beauty that have been influenced by society. This could stem from you, or you could project those feelings onto somebody else. Body shaming is considered as the most serious form of bullying, harassment, and humiliation that a person could be subjected to, from which one may, possibly never recover. The term 'Body Shaming' has only been recently coined, but in practise, acts considered to be body shaming have been in existence for a really long time. This is something that follows you everywhere and engulfs everyone, no matter who you are, the judgement never stops. It is important to note, however, that body shaming does not involve constructive criticism that has been asked for and must not be interchanged with being called out for issues relating to hygiene.

Body shaming could occur in any of the following ways:

- Criticising another's appearance while in their presence.
- Commenting on one's own appearance by comparing with others or judging oneself.
- Criticising another's appearance in their absence or without their knowledge.
- Through advertisements, magazines, films, newspapers, television shows, social media, etc. and other platforms that showcase the ideal human body and reach several people at once.

As per my recently conducted survey that involved 102 persons, a majority of the people understood body shaming to be acts that involve shaming a person just for being fatter than what is considered normal, but it is not so. Body shaming is not just about weight, it could be shaming with reference to one's skin colour, clothes, dressing sense, or anything that is a part of their outward physical appearance as a contributing factor.<sup>ii</sup>

Body shaming is experienced more by women than by men, due to the more restrictive choices awarded to women due to which the line between hot/sexy and vulgar is exceptionally fine, especially in a country like India, where women are constantly subjugated. Women are supposed to be the submissive gender, and their breaking of the societal norms regarding beauty is taken as an act of aggression, thus resulting in them being considered as uncultured and spineless, and the woman's parents are blamed for the so-called low quality of her upbringing.

## Chapter 2

### WHY DOES BODY SHAMING OCCUR?

Body shaming occurs all over the world due to the skewed up sense of beauty that people have. What we find attractive is based on our primitive brain, and our primal senses. The problem is that our primitive brain is under constant assault and the complete control of our respective cultures and the media.<sup>iii</sup> Culture and media have succeeded in creating illusions of the perfect body and what is desirable to our senses, thus resulting in us overriding our own intuitions to conform to the 'perfect' beauty standards. Sitcoms often use the bodies of overweight characters as the basis of many of the jokes on the show, thus further making us believe that shaming such people and making jokes on them is the right thing to do. Messages from each other and from the media often imply that we should want to change, and we should care about being slimmer/fat, fairer/tanner, smaller/bigger, taller/shorter, etc.

Parental influences primarily form one's relationship with one's body as early as early childhood. Parental figures indirectly and directly determine the relationships of their children with physical attractiveness and influence its role in the social life of the concerned children.<sup>iv</sup> The process of socialization is during which the creation of beauty ideals takes place - the concerned parental figures impart to their child patterns of beauty specific to their culture. The parental figures can directly express their approval or disapproval of the appearance of other people, media celebrities, or their own children.

In advertisements for *Fair and Lovely Face Cream* with Yami Gautam and Pooja Hegde, applying the cream made the women fairer and hence consequentially more confident. In the *Garnier Men Facewash* advertisements featuring John Abraham and Tiger Shroff, there was the propagation of the need for men to have fair and clean skin. In the *Olay* Advertisements featuring Mira Rajput, Kalki Koechlin, and Kajol Devgn, looking young and having firm and clean skin made the women feel better about themselves. These advertisements show people that as far as they fit the standards of beauty, they have the capability of becoming secure enough about themselves to accomplish all of their visions in their own way. According to certain reports of 2017, the weight loss industry in India was valued between 60,000 and 70,000 Crore Rupees. Their slogans often include "lose weight, feel great" and others along those lines, that build on the belief that one needs to be skinny to look and consequentially, to feel great. India's outrageous standards for beauty form the marketing strategy for all those companies selling these products.

The standards of beauty in India are extremely shocking. Such extreme beauty standards are carried along by the actors, actresses, models, etc., of our country - the ones who have the perfect figure with the perfect skin, perfect skin colour, and perfect hair. The media portrayal of these people as the heroes and heroines of the country makes us look up to them and admire them, and consider them to be role models, thus successfully aggravating the already poor 'beauty judgement' situation in India.

In India, it is normal and accepted to judge people on the basis of their appearance - their size, shape, weight, colour, skin blemishes, body irregularities, body hair, attires, etc., rather than by their mental abilities and

capabilities. This could be better understood with various advertisements, movies, magazines, and posts on various social media platforms that propagate the need for people to have the perfect figure, be fair and not have any skin blemishes, have the perfect hair, and so on. Fairness, beauty, and anti-ageing creams all come with television advertisements that state that if a person looks fair/beautiful/handsome enough, they would be able to achieve anything.

### Chapter 3

#### **THE CONSEQUENCES OF BODY SHAMING**

I had conducted a survey, in which 45.1% of the people said that they had judged others on the basis of their appearance, whereas 28.4% of the people weren't sure whether they had actually done so. 57.8% of the people claimed to have been body shamed themselves, whereas 19.6% of the people weren't sure if they had been body shamed. 77.5% of the people said that they had criticised their own appearances based on the standards set by society.

Our idea of a normal human body has become very restricted, due to which eating disorders and body image issues often go unrecognised. Eating disorders are some of the most common psychiatric problems and are classified as Anorexia Nervosa (AN), Bulimia Nervosa (BN) and Eating Disorder Not Otherwise Specified (EDNOS). Body shaming affects mental and physical health in surprising ways - both for the person who is body shaming and the one who is being body shamed. In the survey that I had conducted, 99% of those who took part in it knew of the devastating effects of body shaming on a person's mental health. Despite knowing this, they also confessed to have judged other people on the basis of their respective appearances.

##### I. WORDS AND BODY SHAMING

*"You would be killer if you lost those side bulges."*

*"It's so dark, we can see only your teeth, you are merging with the background."*

*"You would fly off in that strong breeze."*

*"Tell mom to put Complian in your milk."*

*"You're so tall, you'll never get a boyfriend."*

These are common phrases that can be heard on a daily basis. Words are powerful. They can be creative as well as destructive. Often, we don't understand the power of the words we speak and hear. Sometimes, a single word can change everything. Even when we don't realise it, words can cause unrealistic expectations of one of their body. Negative associations with respect to the human body can lead to low self-esteem, social isolation, poor body image, and has also been shown to directly contribute to the development of eating disorders. Words are things that are forever etched in our memory, making it very tough for it to be erased. <sup>v</sup>

If we constantly utter self-deprecating words in our internal dialogue, we are allowing the power of words to work against us.<sup>vi</sup>

## II. SOCIAL MEDIA AND BODY SHAMING

Recent research that monitored the effects of the use of Social media platform such as - Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, Pinterest - has found that people frequently using these platforms have body image problems and take part in online body shaming.

Most people are prone to body shaming on a social media platform, by way of receiving cruel feedback when our bodies don't match the unrealistic ideals set by society. Social media platform is noxious for body image, and it also fosters a probability of being the target of someone else's body-shaming comments. It highlights upon high visualizations, ingenious interactions, and alluring appearances as the principal points to ultimately obtain success.<sup>vii</sup>

### Chapter 4

#### **STIGMATIZING THE ACT OF BODY SHAMING<sup>viii</sup>**

People don't realise the negative effect of such unnecessary bullying on the ones they're bullying. Even if they have undergone the same treatment themselves, they still inconsiderately judge the next person. As I have understood from my survey, most of the times, they don't mean anything negative by their words and actions, they just don't seem to be able to stop themselves from judging the other person.

***The first step would be diagnosing the problem at hand.*** Due to the frequency of its occurrence in our country, and the extremely easy way of passing comments on others or on even ourselves, most people don't even realise that they are body shaming others, or that they themselves are being body shamed. If people realise that they are doing something wrong, there is a greater chance that they could stop doing the said wrongful act.

***The second step, after the diagnosis of body shaming as a problem, would involve understanding why the act of body shaming is a wrongful act, and why one must not judge another person based solely on their physical outwardly appearances.*** The right kind of education must be given. Right from the home to the place of study to the place of work, people need to be educated and constantly reminded on why the act is wrong and what its potential consequences could be. Beginning with this process at a young age would prove to be helpful by influencing the thoughts of the children. For those with already set mindsets, this process would be difficult, as it involves not just learning something new, it involves unlearning what has already been learnt and practised, and then relearning what is being newly taught. It also involves their willingness to take part in this unlearning process.

*The third and final step involves the implementation of these newly learnt concepts.* This would happen when people feel like they won't be judged based on their choices and their appearances. It would show them that it is their inner beauty and talent that matters. This is the process that could be mainly propagated in films, magazines, advertisements, newspapers, and social media. One example for this is *Calvin Klein*, as can be understood from their latest billboard advertisements. Additionally, the use of words like 'plus-size', etc. could also be banned to further this cause.

## Chapter 5

### CONCLUSION

Body shaming is an extremely shameful act that ought to be stigmatized for the betterment of society. People are expected to meet these unreal expectations of the human body, and if they aren't able to do so, then they are expected to be open towards unsolicited comments towards their looks and attire in relation to that. Sadly, today it's not the act of body shaming, but the body itself that is being stigmatized. As I understood from my survey, 66.7% of those who participated felt that people have pre-conceived notions of what they consider beautiful/handsome, and they tend to stick to this notion and be prejudiced towards those who don't fall into this category. 3.9% even confessed that they themselves were judgemental towards those whom they considered imperfect on the basis of their looks.

We are our worst critics - this is a phrase used to describe how we as individuals are often too hard on ourselves. This is supposed to involve a natural tendency for us to be better than we were previously. However, this craze of ameliorating ourselves can result in severe consequences to our mental health, especially when this process of ameliorating ourselves involves our physical appearances.

*"It mocks and stigmatizes its victims, tearing down self-respect and perpetuating the harmful idea that our unique physical appearances should be compared to air-brushed notions of 'perfect.' What really matters is our character and humanity."*

- Mike Feuer

*Los Angeles City Attorney*

In India, problems related to mental health are, even today, considered as taboo, and you confessing to having gone to a psychiatrist is as good as saying that you are a 'mental' person and you're to be admitted to an asylum. Due to this, confessing to have been mentally affected by someone else's comments on your appearance thus leading to you judging your own body could probably alienate you to your own family. The fact that people feel terribly low about themselves and start to hate their body, the fact that the kind of motivation such words give people are not the right kind, the fact that people feel uncomfortable and agitated

in their own skin, the fact that people feel ugly, undeserving, insecure, embarrassed, and extremely underconfident about themselves and their abilities because of the way they look, seems to be overlooked by everyone. The word 'healthy' itself has a negative connotation today.

Being dark-skinned shouldn't give anyone an inferiority complex and being slim or being size zero shouldn't be considered as the gold standard for being perfect. Quality beauty products too can actually be used to augment one's personality and appearance. There's nothing wrong with undergoing any beauty procedure, but depending on any of these is definitely unhealthy, and can be dangerous. It is important to ensure that diets, beauty products and procedures do not deride your health. This culture of judging others based solely on their looks is deeply ingrained in our psyche and would definitely be almost impossible to weed out. Times are changing faster than the mindset of the people, and the stigma is still on the wrong acts. The need to slur on the act of shaming someone on the basis of their appearance is of extreme importance today.

If people understand the concept of body shaming and accept that they have indulged in it earlier irrespective of their intention, and their mindsets are influenced in such a way, that they would be ashamed of themselves whenever they even so much as think in a derogatory fashion about others or even about themselves regarding their physical appearances in the future, then definitely, body shaming can be reduced to nothing but a concept. But even so, it would be decades before any such revolution could take place that could change the face of society.

## Chapter 6

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#### *I. PRIMARY SOURCE*

I had conducted an online survey using Google Forms, in which 102 people participated.

There were seven questions in my survey, each of which aimed at understanding people's understanding of body shaming, whether they had judged anyone else or even themselves as a result of society's incredibly high standards of perfect, and what the effect was on each of them if they had ever been judged in such a way. It was filled out by people between the ages of 15 and 23 - the age of maturity and maximum understanding of such things in my opinion. I had even taken down the answers given by my parents and those of some of my friends (all between the ages of 41 and 49 - not included in the survey results, I had taken them down separately), in order to understand the power of our parents in affecting our thoughts and mindsets, and whether the outlooks and mentalities of the respective parents could be changed now. That's what led me to my own conclusions and suggestions with respect to this topic.

I had even asked them to put down their gender, in order to understand the effects of body shaming on each of them, in their respective ages. It wasn't necessary for those participating to put down their names, as I felt that if any of them wished to talk about their experience, but still be anonymous, then this would give them the opportunity to do so.



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