

Body Shaming As A Predictor Of Psychological Distress Among School-Going Adolescent Girls

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Abstract:

Background: Body shaming has become a concern for adolescent girls and may negatively affect their psychological well-being.

Objective: To examine the relationship between body shaming and psychological distress among school-going adolescent girls.

Methods: A cross-sectional descriptive correlational study was employed among 160 school-going adolescent girls aged 12-15 years selected from selected government high schools, Imphal East and Imphal West, Manipur. The Body Image Shame Scale (BISS; Duarte et al., 2015) and the Depression Anxiety Stress Scales (DASS-42) developed by Lovibond and Lovibond (1995) were used to gather data. Spearman's correlation and simple linear regression were used for data analysis.

Results: The majority of the participants experienced moderate level of body shaming (65.0%) and psychological distress (66.3%). There was a positive correlation between body shaming and psychological distress ($r_s = 0.450$, $p < 0.001$) and psychological distress was significantly predicted by body shaming, accounting for 20.3% of the variance ($R^2 = 0.203$).

Conclusion: There was a significant association between body shaming and psychological distress among school-going adolescent girls. Results further showed that body shaming predicted psychological distress among the girls. The results indicate the importance of providing support in schools to encourage positive body image and adolescent mental health.

Keywords: Body shaming, psychological distress, adolescent girls, Manipur.

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I. Introduction

Adolescence is a period of major physical, emotional, cognitive, and social transformation. Adolescent girls may be especially susceptible to appearance-related concerns during this time, and self-worth and social acceptance may be tied to physical attractiveness (Reyna et al., 2011). Concurrently, mental health issues like anxiety, depression and stress have emerged as a significant public health challenge that impacts adolescents' academic success, interpersonal relationships, and wellbeing (WHO, 2021). The widespread use of digital technology and social media has further exacerbated the pressures of appearance because adolescents are frequently exposed to unrealistic beauty standards, appearance-based comparisons, cyberbullying and body shaming (Braghieri et al., 2022; Septiana, 2021). Body shaming refers to negative comments or ridicule towards an individual's physical appearance, which can happen in a school, family, peer group, or in an online setting (Nasution & Simanjuntak, 2020; Siregar, 2023).

Body shaming has been shown to be consistently linked to negative psychological effects such as body dissatisfaction, low self-esteem, anxiety, depression, emotional distress, eating disorders, and social withdrawal. Adolescent girls, especially, are vulnerable because they tend to internalize the beauty standards of the society and make social comparisons based on appearance (Chairan, 2018; Haryati et al., 2021; Lestari, 2019; Hestianingsih, 2018). The body image dissatisfaction among adolescent girls was also reported in India (David & Warriar, 2021).

Although there have been various pieces of evidence to substantiate the negative psychological effects of body shaming, there is still a lack of research exploring body shaming as a predictor of psychological distress among school-going adolescent girls in the Indian context especially in Manipur. It is crucial to fill this gap to support school-based mental health interventions and to encourage positive body image. Thus, the present study aims to explore the role of body shaming as a predictor of psychological distress on school-going adolescent girls.

II. Literature Review

Given the nature of the developmental stage of adolescence, when there is a heightened awareness of the self and a process of self-construction, body shaming has become a serious social problem for this age group, especially for adolescent girls. During adolescence, there are significant physical, emotional, and social changes that make young people more attuned to how they are perceived by others and what others expect of them when it comes to their appearance (Reyna et al., 2011). Particularly girls are at risk since self-worth, social acceptance and perceived competence are linked to female attractiveness. Body shaming is an act of criticism, ridicule or negative comment about someone's body, which includes body weight, body shape, height, skin colour, facial features that deviate from socially constructed beauty ideals (Nasution & Simanjuntak, 2020; Siregar, 2023). These comments are sometimes dismissed as "teasing" or "joking," but repeated exposure can be a type of psychological abuse, and can have a negative impact on emotional health. Gilbert's theory of shame (2002) proposes that shame alters cognitive, emotional and behavioural functioning through the development of feelings of inferiority, self-criticism and social withdrawal. As a result, those who experience body shaming will go on to have negative perceptions of their bodies and practice unhealthy coping strategies, such as restricting food intake and over exercising (Maria et al., 2023).

With the rise of digital technology and social media, the problem of body shaming is growing in number and intensity. Social networking sites provide unrealistic images and digitally edited photos which leads to frequent comparisons based on appearances (Braghieri et al., 2022; Septiana, 2021). Moreover, cyberbullying has opened up avenues for criticism regarding the appearance, allowing for the spread of body shaming experiences to reach broader audiences and endure over time (Syahputra et al., 2024). These virtual experiences have been linked with feelings of body dissatisfaction, emotional distress and lower self-esteem in youth. Numerous studies have shown that body shaming is linked to negative psychological effects. Common responses of victims include body dissatisfaction, low self-esteem, anxiety, depression, abnormal eating behaviors, and social isolation (Chairan, 2018; Haryati et al., 2021; Lestari, 2019). Body dissatisfaction is a condition of continually having negative thoughts about one's body, often when adolescents internalize an unrealistic body image and make comparisons to idealized appearances (Amarina & Laksmiwati, 2021). Additionally, Chairan (2018) found that there was a strong relationship between body shame and disordered eating behaviours, suggesting that criticism about appearance can lead to unhealthy weight management.

In addition, it is found that the body shaming situation in adolescents occurs more often and has a more negative impact on adolescent girls than on adolescent boys because there is a greater focus on female appearance in society (Hestianingsih, 2018). For girls, self-rejection of their appearance is highly likely to be internalized, leading to increased anxiety, depression and self-esteem issues. In India, there is a high prevalence of body dissatisfaction reported in adolescent girls (Dixit et al., 2011; David & Warriar, 2021; Vinay et al., 2021), indicating that the issue of appearance is a significant public health problem. The exposure to body shaming for a prolonged period of time is also believed to have a negative impact on students' academic achievement, interpersonal relationships, and social participation (Ramahardhila & Supriyono, 2022; Malasari & Mukhlis, 2022).

Although rising data has emerged connecting body shaming with negative psychological health, there are key areas of literature that are missing. Current existing research has tended to investigate the general adolescent population, or students at universities, and to focus on correlational relationships instead of on body shaming being a significant statistical predictor of psychological outcomes. Moreover, the evidence base on the ground is limited amongst adolescent girls in school-going population in India, specifically in Manipur. Therefore, a focus on body shaming as a predictor of the psychological distress of this phenomenon is crucial in understanding its impact on adolescent mental health and to offer evidence to support the development of school-based prevention and intervention programmes for positive body image and psychological well-being.

Research Gap

While there is a clear relationship between body shaming and negative psychological outcomes in adolescents in previous research, there are some gaps that need to be filled. Most of the research has concentrated on general adolescent population or university students, while school going adolescent girls have received hardly any attention. Furthermore, although the cultural and social context has a significant influence on body image and mental health, there is limited evidence from Manipur in this area. In addition, little research has focused on body shaming as a statistical predictor of overall psychological distress with a comprehensive scale like the Depression Anxiety Stress Scales (DASS-42). Hence, the present study aims to examine the relationship between body shaming and psychological distress among school-going adolescent girls in Manipur, with a view to presenting empirical evidence specific to the context to support school based mental health interventions.

Objectives

1. To measure the extent of body shaming among school-going adolescent girls.
2. To determine the extent of the psychological distress among adolescent girls.
3. To find out if there is a significant relationship between body shaming and psychological distress among adolescent girls.
4. To determine whether body shaming predicts psychological distress.

Hypotheses

1. There is no significant correlation between body shaming and psychological distress among school-going adolescent girls.
2. Body shaming does not significantly predict psychological distress among adolescent girls.

Operational Definitions

Body Shaming: Refers to the experience when others make negative comments, provide criticism, tease or ridicule someone for their physical appearance. The Body Image Shame Scale (BISS; Duarte et al., 2015)) was used to assess body shaming in this study, with higher scores reflecting more body shaming experiences.

Psychological Distress: Refers to the level of emotional distress of participants (including depression, anxiety and stress symptoms). Psychological distress was assessed in this study with the total score of the Depression Anxiety Stress Scales (DASS-42; Lovibond and Lovibond.,1995) with higher scores reflecting psychological distress.

III. Research Methodology

Study Design and Setting

The quantitative, cross-sectional descriptive correlational design was employed to look into the relationship between body shaming and psychological distress in the school-going adolescent girls. The study was carried out in selected Government High Schools of Imphal East and Imphal West districts of Manipur, India.

Participants and Sampling

Adolescent girls aged 12-15, studying in Government High Schools constituted the population used. According to Yamane's formula (1967) the minimum sample size was 138 respondents. A simple random sampling of 160 was used to make up for the potential for non-response and to maximize the precision of the estimates.

Instruments

Structured demographic questionnaire, the Body Image Shame Scale (BISS; Duarte et al., 2015)) for body shaming, and Depression Anxiety Stress Scales (DASS-42; Lovibond and Lovibond.,1995) for psychological distress were used to collect data. Expert review in the areas of psychology, psychiatric nursing, mental health and educational research confirmed content validity. The internal consistency of the instruments was satisfactory: Cronbach's alpha coefficient for the BISS was 0.89 and for the DASS-42 was 0.91.

Data Collection and Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance was granted by the Institutional Human Ethics Committee, Manipur University (MUIHEC) (Ref. No. MU/IHEC/2025/16). Administrative permission was sought from the Zonal Education Officer (ZEO), Zone-II, Imphal East (Porompat) and Zonal Education Officer (ZEO), Zone-I, Imphal West, Manipur and principals of the concerned schools. Parents/guardians provided informed consent and participants provided assent. Self-administered questionnaires were used to collect data, which took about 35-40 minutes to fill out during school hours.

IV. Results And Findings

The data were imported into Microsoft Excel and analyzed with Jamovi version 2.7.37. Participant characteristics and study variables were summarized using descriptive statistics. Spearman's rank correlation was used to evaluate the relationship between body shaming and psychological distress while simple linear regression analysis was used to test the prediction of body shaming on psychological distress. The p-value < 0.05 was regarded as statistically significant.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics

Variable	Mean	SD
Body Shaming	58.44	10.22
Psychological Distress	62.42	11.29

Table 2. Level of Body Shaming

Level	Frequency	%
Low	38	23.8
Moderate	104	65.0
High	18	11.2

Table 3. Level of Psychological Distress

Level	Frequency	%
Low	29	18.1
Moderate	106	66.3
High	25	15.6

Table 4. Correlation Analysis

Variables	Spearman's rho	p-value
Body Shaming and Psychological Distress	.450	< .001

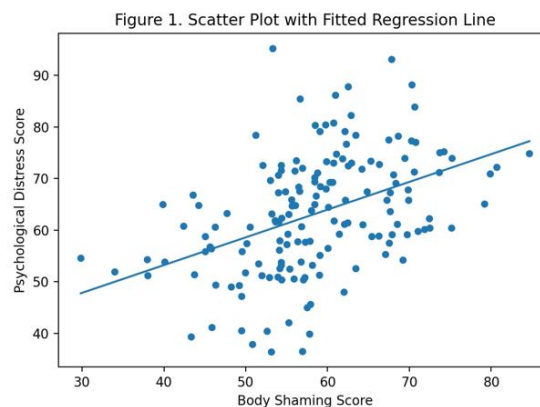
Interpretation:

As revealed through speaking to Spearman's rho correlation analysis, the results showed moderate positive statistically significant correlation between body shaming and psychological distress ($r_s = .450$, $p < .001$). Participants who indicated that they felt more body shamed also indicated higher levels of psychological distress.

Table 5. Linear Regression Predicting Psychological Distress from Body Shaming

Predictor	B	SE	β	t	p
Constant	29.38	5.21		5.64	< .001
Body shaming	0.554	0.087	0.450	6.34	< .001

Model fit: $R = .450$, $R^2 = .203$, Adjusted $R^2 = .198$, $F(1, 158) = 40.18$, $p < .001$



The scatter plot of the body shaming and psychological distress scores is shown in Figure 1. There is a positive association between body shaming and psychological distress as indicated by the regression line being positive. Although the data points show some variability, the overall pattern suggests that the higher body shaming scores are associated with higher psychological distress scores.

V. Discussion

Considering psychological distress as a dependent variable, the present study used body shaming as an independent variable to predict the psychological distress among adolescent girls attending school in selected Government High Schools of Imphal East and Imphal West of Manipur. The results suggest that majority of adolescent girls are exposed to body shaming and most of them indicated that they were moderately body shamed. This prevalence is greater than what was found by Gam et al. (2020) and this indicates that criticism about appearance might be more prevalent in the present study population. As girls grow up, their growing awareness of their bodies and the influence of peers and society's standards of beauty can make them more susceptible to body shaming (Hestianingsih, 2018).

The psychological effects were also reported at a moderate level, with most participants indicating that they were emotionally vulnerable as adolescents. This is in line with the World Health Organization (2021), which postulates that anxiety, depression and stress are prevalent mental health issues among adolescents. The study also found that there was a significant moderate positive correlation between body shaming and psychological distress ($\rho = 0.450$, $p < 0.001$), suggesting an increasing level of psychological distress with an increase in experiences of body shaming. This finding is consistent with Gilbert's (2002) theory of shame suggesting that shame triggers negative emotional and psychological experiences. The results also align with the previous studies that found that body shaming is a factor that leads to depression, anxiety, and low self-esteem, body dissatisfaction, and social withdrawal among adolescents (Chairan, 2018; Haryati et al., 2021; Lestari, 2019).

Regression analysis showed that body shaming was a significant predictor of psychological distress and accounted for 20.3% of the variance. While this shows that body shaming is an important factor to the psychological health of adolescents, it also suggests that other factors like family support, peer relationships, school stress, social media, and personal characteristics play a role in their psychological health as well. The results highlight the importance of school based interventions encouraging positive body image, enhancing mental health support and the prevention of appearance-based bullying. The cross-sectional design does not, however, permit causal statements and further studies using a longitudinal design are needed to explore the long-term effects of body shaming on the mental health of adolescents.

VI. Conclusion

The present study revealed that body shaming was common among school-going adolescent girls, and was significantly related to psychological distress. Body shaming was moderately positively correlated with psychological distress, and was a significant predictor of overall psychological distress. The results underscore the important role that body shaming plays in the mental health of adolescents and the need for school-based prevention measures, body positivity education, and psychological help. More studies are needed on the longitudinal relationship between body shaming and psychological distress.

Limitations

The study has a number of limitations that need to be taken into consideration when analyzing the results. The cross-sectional research design prevents causal inferences from being drawn between body shaming and the resulting psychological distress. Data was gathered through self-administered questionnaires; this could have been distorted by recall or social desirability bias. The study did not include the adolescent girls from private schools and/or other parts of the country, which limits the generalizability of the findings. Psychological distress was measured with the DASS-42 scale, which measures symptoms of depression, anxiety and stress but is unable to measure the entirety of psychological distress. The psychological distress accounted for only 20.3% of the variance in this study, suggesting that other psychological, social, familial and environmental factors not included in this study may also influence adolescent mental health.

Recommendations

Based on the results of the study, the following recommendations are put forward: Schools should have programs to raise awareness about body shaming, bullying prevention and positive body image. School counsellors need to regularly do screenings for body image issues and offer the necessary psychological help to students who are shamed when it comes to their bodies. Parents need to promote healthy communication, avoid criticizing children based on their appearances, and to promote positive self-esteem. They should also keep an eye on adolescents' social media usage and teach them about the idealized beauty standards.

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