The Effects Of Body Shaming On Young Adults' Mental Health: A Case Study Of Rawalpindi, Pakistan

Wajiha Nargis Baig[1], Aneeqa Ansari[2*],
Imran Ali[3], [4]Laila Hussain

[1]MS Scholar, Department of Psychology, Foundation University School of Science and Technology, Rawalpindi, Pakistan, wnbaig2898@gmail.com
[2]Lecturer, Department of Sociology, Fatima Jinnah Women University, Rawalpindi, Pakistan, ansarianeeqa@fjwu.edu.pk
[3]Assistant Professor, Department of English, University of Haripur, Pakistan, imranali@uoh.edu.pk
[4]Visiting Lecturer, Women Degree College Skardu, Pakistan, lailahussain711@gmail.com

Abstract

Whether experienced on social media or in person, the findings of modern psychology consider the effects of body shaming—in terms of skinny shaming, fat shaming, dwarf shaming, or giant shaming—detrimental to mental health. This study explores how the slurs of body shaming on social media (Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, etc.) and in actual life affect the mental health of young adults and shake their confidence in different walks of life. Both men and women report experiencing it to different degrees and levels. The study also enlists the perfectionist trends that are advertised as well as promoted by different consumerist brands and firms in the make-up, body-shaping, and body-health care industries. With qualitative and interpretive analysis, the study conducts a case study of Rawalpindi with a sample of 12 (female [06] and male [06]) residents, whose semi-structured interviews are in-depth analyzed with Higgins' (1987) theory of "Self-Discrepancy". The findings of the study drawn from target interviews attest to the fact that—with a slight variation—both men and women have been victims of body shaming both on

social media and in actual life. Next, the findings of the study categorically mark social media as a chief source of normalizing the in-fashion beauty standards against casual human shapes, which, at large, shape public opinion and shrink room for the casual physiques in society. Such trends, both consciously and unconsciously, bound the casual victims to meet the standards of in-fashion beauty standards (which resultantly benefits the advertising industries) and to avoid low criticism, body slurs, criticism, self-esteem, depression, and lack of confidence. The study is highly significant for the health of a balanced society and corresponds to UN SDG No. 03 (Good Health and Well-being).

Keywords: Body Shaming, Social Media, Self-Discrepancy, Rawalpindi.

1. Introduction

Body shaming, either in the category of skinny shaming or fat shaming or dwarf shaming, or giant shaming bears adverse effects on the mental well-being of the victims. Unaware of the gravity and consequences, individuals practice body shaming as a casual drill of daily life. In other words, it has become a part of life in both urban and rural settings, which, without being noticed, humiliates and downgrades individuals for their skinny or fatty body shapes (Mohsin, 2018). The contemporary perfectionist trends advertise as well as promote different consumerist brands and firms in the make-up, body-shaping, and body-health care industries. Such trends, both consciously and unconsciously, traumatize the skinny or fatty victims to meet the standards of the in-fashion beauty standards and to avoid low criticism, body slurs, criticism, self-esteem, depression, and lack of confidence. These moves resultantly benefit the advertising industries, and relevant firms (Vargas, 2022).

The contemporary body standards for both men and women are fixed. Slim and tall women with perfect curves and balanced complexion are considered beautiful. While slim tall men with muscular packs and balanced complexion are considered handsome. The question is: where do these beauty standards come from? Indeed, they are advertised and indoctrinated through different platforms of social media (Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, etc.) by different consumerist brands and firms in the make-up, body-shaping, and body-healthcare industries. Given the core realities of these so-called beauty standards, they are faked and fabricated through various filters and shades to brainwash the common minds for their commercial benefits. The masses are wired with the advertised beauty standards and are made to believe that without the in-fashion beauty standards, they will not be acceptable in a society facing inferiority complexes, criticism, marginalization, etc. (Vargas, 2022).

For judging themselves through these in-fashion beauty standards, individuals post their activities on different social media accounts such as Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, etc. to gauge their place on the rubric of in-fashion beauty standards. Positive and encouraging responses squash them into cheerful and confident moods. While negative and discouraging remarks/responses subject them to inferiority complexes, depression, low self-esteem, pessimism, etc. So it attests to the fact that the nature of these beauty standards is virtual rather than physical and genuine, which fails the test of the actual human world. In sum, it won't be a note of exaggeration that social media has ascended to become the new master of the day which bears the capacity to shape individuals' thoughts and ways of life (Vargas, 2022).

Our culture and media promote these fake standards of perfection. As a result, plastic surgeries, cosmetic surgeries, height surgeries, lip filling, breast augmentation, and wide hips are in fashion. People pay boatloads of money to acquire these beauty standards through various body transformations. Likewise, the middle, upper, elite, and super-elite classes in Pakistan have adopted the fashion of transforming their bodies. Primarily it was common in females, but recently an equal tendency by both females and males towards the trend has been noticed to capitalize on their acceptability in society. The trend has given birth to a chain of female and male saloons across the country (France-Presse, 2018). Models, actors, news anchors, TikTokers, and other celebrities are on top of this list because the success of their profession hinges on their appearances and social acceptability in society. The irony of the fate is these models themselves use these products and also advertise them to swell their usage in society. As a result, these standards have become the acceptable norms in society and essential amenities of nearly each individual.

Like the law of nature, these bodily transformations have side effects too. An Irani girl underwent 50 cosmetic surgeries to look like the Hollywood actress, Angelina Julie (19750) and resultantly died. Likewise, in Pakistan, a number of celebrities have ruined their faces by undergoing these cosmetic and plastic surgeries, crash dieting courses, etc. The perception of bodily perfection has hypnotized the masses who judge their worth through the lenses of the social media beauty standards. In media, anchors, actors, and models are not given roles until they are up to the mark of these beauty standards. According to these media houses, perfect anchors, models, anchors, and participants influence viewership. The leading roles in these

media houses are given to those anchors who stand the test of these ideals such as Kubra Khan, Mahira Khan, Mahwish Hayath, Ayza Khan, Hiba Bukhari, Hania Amir, etc.   Those who are shorn of these beauty standards are made to accept inferior roles. Kubra Khan, who is a famous celebrity of the hour, detailed how she was subjected to criticism after gaining weight during her cancer treatment in the UK and was not denied some key roles. After her bodily transformation, now she is considered one of the most successful actresses on the Pakistani screen. Her story testifies that complying with these body and beauty standards is not a choice but a compulsion in contemporary Pakistan. Parents usually compare and criticize their own children, making them lose their self-esteem and confidence, which in adult or later adult life surface in the form of chronic health and psychological issues.

Whether observed on social media or in person, the findings of modern psychology consider the effects of different shades of body shaming detrimental to mental health. This study explores how the slurs of body shaming on social media and in actual life affect the mental health of young adults and shake their confidence in different walks of life. Both men and women report experiencing it to different degrees and levels. The study also enlists the perfectionist trends that are advertised as well as promoted by different consumerist brands and firms in the make-up, body-shaping, and body-health care industries. The study through a select number of respondents would collect the target data and would gauge the degree of hazards of body shaming on young adults' mental health. Upon exploring the phenomenon in depth, the study would let loose an acute awareness of the hazards of body shaming on mental health. The study would also advocate its potential in damaging the health of a progressive

society. These elements mark the study as highly significant for the students, researchers, teachers, and advocates of mental health and social transformation. With the help of these characteristics, the study directly corresponds to UN SDG No. 03 (Good Health and Well-being).

2. Research Methods

With qualitative and case-study research methods, a purposive sample of twelve males (N=6) and female (N=6) participants aged 18 to 35 is chosen across Rawalpindi, Pakistan, which is one of the melting bowls of the country. Through informed consent, ethical consideration, demographic sheets, and semi-structured interviews, the data is collected from the target respondents and is thematically analyzed through Higgins' theory of "Self-Discrepancy" to achieve the objective of the study.

2.1 Theoretical Framework

The theory of "Self-discrepancy theory" proposed by E. Tory Higgins (1987), the term 'Self-Discrepancy' is defined as the conflict or inconsistency in the self-concept, the conflict between the actual self and ideal self (APA Dictionary of Psychology, 2020). People compare their actual self to the self-guide which refers to what a person wants to achieve in life. The self-guide has further two categories which are 'Ideal Self-Guide (revolving around hopes and desires) and 'Ought Self-Guide' (revolving around duties and responsibilities). Comparison of an actual self to an ideal self leads to two types of emotional and psychological experiences. If the actual self and ideal self are discrepant (different), a person goes through feelings of dejection, hopelessness, and disappointment. Whereas if a person's actual and ideal self are similar, the feelings are associated with elation, happiness, and satisfaction. Similarly, when a

person's actual self and ought-self are discrepant, they experience worry, anxiety, and agitation. Likewise, if an ought self and an ideal self are similar, the person feels contentment and peace. In the current study, self-discrepancy is related to the context of body image and dissatisfaction. People with excessive exposure to social media are constantly indulged in the comparison of themselves with someone. The self-guide, they have made in their minds is unapproachable or unrealistic which is why they feel low self-esteem and depression along with abnormal eating behavior patterns. The comparison of the actual self with the self-guide in the minds of people makes them dissatisfied and irritated. After exposure to the media, self-acceptance gets low along with self-esteem and confidence. The emotional vulnerability factor of this theory is relatable to body shaming and body image concerns (Self-Discrepancy Theory in Social Psychology - iResearchNet, 2016). So the theory of discrepancy would serve as a theoretical lens to this study because it explores the discrepancy between an actual and ideal self. In this context, the ideal self is brainwashed by different forums of social media such as

3. Literature Review

The research focuses on the effects of body shaming—in terms of skinny shaming or fat shaming or dwarf shaming or giant shaming—, which bears adverse effects on the mental well-being of young individuals such as low criticism, self-esteem, depression, and lack of confidence. This part of the study reviews the research objectives, methods, and findings of the relevant articles, reference books, book chapters, etc. on different shades of body shaming that whether in portions or whole similar work has been conducted before or not.

Memon et al. (2018) in their incentive-based study, "The Effectiveness of an Incentivized Physical Activity Program (Active Student) Among Female Medical Students in Pakistan: A Randomized Controlled Trial" aims to explore the weight and its psychological effects on female students pertaining to self-esteem, guilt, body-shaming, and perception of physical beauty. It was a randomized controlled trial that was conducted at the Peoples University of Medical and Health Sciences for Women, Nawabshah, Pakistan (March to May 2017). The study concludes that financial incentives combined with a smartphone app are designed to promote physical activity or decrease obesity. However, it opines that body shaming results in low self-esteem, self-guilt, depression, etc.

Likewise, Naqi et al. in their study "Self-Objectification and Body Shame: A Study about Appearance Anxiety among Pakistani Students Participating in Sports" examine self-objectification and body shame in relation to appearance anxiety among college students participating in sports in Pakistan. The sample included male (N=150) and female (N=150) students of government and private colleges in Rawalpindi and Islamabad. The self-objectification was assessed through The Surveillance subscale of the Objectified Body Consciousness Scale (McKinley & Hyde, 1996), appearance anxiety through Appearance Anxiety Scale brief version (Dion, Dion & Keelan, 1990) and body shame with the help of the Body Shame Subscale, of Objectified Body Consciousness Scale (McKinely & Hyde, 1996). The findings attest to the fact that experiencing self-objectification is unswervingly related to body shame and appearance anxiety.

On the same track, Khan and his co-authors (2023) in their study, "Unleashing the 4th Wave:

Exploring the Battle against Body Shaming through Feminist Social Media and Action Research in Twitter: A Comprehensive Analysis of Blind Chances and Empowering Outcomes" explores the struggle of women advocates against the sexual assaults, rape culture, and body Shaming through Feminist Social Media and Action Research. The research collects random related data from Twitter and analyzes and interprets it to answer the target question. The findings of the study testify to the existence of sexual assaults, rape culture, and body shaming against women in Pakistan and find women advocates' counter strategies on Twitter effective enough to curtail their rampant growth and spread awareness about them.

Khan and his colleagues (2022) in their article, "Perception about Body Image Media Advertisements among Female Students in Twin Cities, Pakistan" analyze the impact of positive body campaigns on TV against women's body shaming in Pakistan. The study scrutinizes the role of (social) media in perfecting body ideals and transforming the masses' opinion about body shape/size and beauty standards. The study examines the perception of body image media advertisements among female students in the twin cities of Islamabad and Rawalpindi, Pakistan. More specifically, the study analyzes six selected media advertisement campaigns displayed on different TV channels. The study used quantitative methods to acquire the opinions of N=282 Pakistani female students from five different universities whose results were analyzed through descriptive statistics. The findings of the study specified that the selected advertisement campaigns bore effective potential in achieving their desired objectives.

Muhamad Daha (2020) in his article, "The Behavior of Viewers Towards Women Objectification in Television Advertisements: A Case Study of Sahiwal City in Pakistan", with the theory of "objectification", explores the viewers' response to the objectification of women in television advertisements. With purposive and nonprobability sampling, the participants (306 female students) were chosen from different universities in Sahiwal, Pakistan. Through personal visits, the data was collected from them with an open-ended questionnaire which was analyzed with SPSS and AMOS software. The findings of the study testified that women's objectification leads to grave mental health risks.

The in-depth review of the relevant literature testifies to the fact that different studies have addressed the issue of body shaming from multiple angles. But no study has, so far, addressed the issue of body shaming in terms of skinny shaming, fat shaming, dwarf shaming, or giant shaming in such detail. Unlike the previous studies, this study explores the different shades of body shaming and its lethal effects on the mental well-being of young individuals in adult or later adult life with semi-structured detailed interviews in Rawalpindi, Pakistan. The comprehensive review marks the study as the first of its kind in these domains.

4. Discussion and Results

The effects of body shaming on both men and women hunt individuals in their adult or late adult lives. However, as compared to women, men are noticed to pay less attention to such cases and hush them. Furthermore, women are found much more expressive about such incidents, and, in the majority of cases, instantly report it. Like the scheme of the interview, the analysis of the study is divided into four themes, which are mirrored across the 10 questions.

Each question constitutes a segment of the analysis section. Each question revolves around the objectives of the study, whose thematic analysis passports the argument into valid findings of the study as follows.

Question 1: In this question, people were asked about their use of social media and its influence on them. Almost everyone, including both men and women, confirms their usage of social media. Most of them believe they spend a considerable amount of time on social media. Easy access to the Internet, electronic devices, and varied social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, etc. is called the primary reason behind their generous use of social media.

Question 2: The question is about following famous people (like celebrities, models, influencers, etc.) on social media. In this domain, the study finds women more involved than men. The majority of women follow these screen women whose artificial beauty and physiques make them experience feelings of jealousy and an inferiority complex. To meet these so-called standards of beauty, they embark on the journey of physical transformation. Given the idealism of these famous actors on their social media accounts, the influenced individuals start working on their bodies to get into acceptable shapes. They either do it with the help of social media/internet or hire consultants/trainers. Failing to transform in certain shapes, some of them, develop psychological issues which proportionally affect their mental health. One of the female participants reported, "I follow female celebrities to get to know about styling, dress sense, and fitness. When I see their pictures, I become jealous, angry, and insecure about my body and look as if I am not good-looking, and attractive. I just go through these depressive phases; I refuse to talk to anyone and shut myself up in the room".

Hence, it proves that women are more emotionally affected by celebrities on social media. Like women, a thinner number of men also appear suffering from this condition. The results align with another study that finds girls are more influenced by using social media. The study attests to the fact that individuals often feel dissatisfied with their bodies. They post pictures to receive compliments and positive responses about their looks. However, if they receive negative comments, they end up feeling sorry for themselves and might start eating in unusual ways, which often leads to health complications (Meier & Gray, 2014).

Question 3: The third question focuses on the number of participants who compare themselves to others on social media. Both men and women participants are found to compare themselves to people of the same gender, fitness trainers, and celebrities. Men often compare themselves to others and feel insecure because they aren't as wealthy, accomplished, or famous as their admired celebrities are. Like their ideals, they also wish for a settled life. On the other hand, women feel more stressed and unhappy about their bodies as compared to men. They want to transform their bodies to be ideally slimmer and more attractive, which they consider crucial steps for their success and confidence. So, both men and women engaged in self-comparison, but with different perspectives and degrees. The results bear similarity to a prior study where both women and men were discovered comparing themselves to people of the same gender and profession. Women tend to compare themselves to athletes, actors, models, peers, and family members. Men also compare themselves to athletes, professionals, and models, but they don't feel as dissatisfied with themselves as women do. In sum,

their comparisons are not as intense as women's (Franzoi & Klaiber, 2007).

Question 4: This question focuses on the idea of the "perfect body" for men and women. Participants were questioned about their thoughts on what a perfect body looks like. All the male participants have a similar perception. They describe an ideal masculine body with wide shoulders, a lean torso, height, and strong muscles, along with a well-defined jawline. This kind of body is the personification of popular fictional male protagonists and heroes. On the other hand, all the female participants share a different view. They believe the perfect body should be slim, thin, and delicate. Additionally, they think being fair and bright is also part of this perfection. These ideas are influenced by the celebrities and influencers whom they follow as their ideal figures. Franchina and Coco's research (2018) share more or less the same perspective. They found that as young girls and boys use social media more, their preferences for body types shift with screen priorities. Spending more time on social networking sites like Facebook, Instagram, etc. makes them notice their own perceived physical flaws. They find that an ideal body for boys is described as being tall, muscular, and sturdy. While for girls an ideal body should be thin, and delicate, with specific curves and features.

Question 5: This question addresses how participants feel about their appearance when interacting with others. Most of the male participants share that they feel self-conscious about looking their best when in a group setting. They pay attention to how they dress to fit in with the group. Some male participants also expressed feeling overly concerned about their color, weight, height, and muscular look in gatherings. On the other hand, many of the female participants expressed distress about being judged or criticized for

their color, height, weight, etc. during gatherings. Unlike men, women appear more conscious about looking perfect on such occasions.

Question 6: This question addresses participants' experiences of facing bullying or body shaming, whether on social media or in person. A majority of the male participants share that they have encountered bullying, and body shaming on several occasions. Among friends, they sometimes become the butt of jokes and ridicule. They are called nicknames such as "elephant" and "mouse" that refer to their overweight/underweight physical appearance. Even on social media, they receive the same responses. These instances are noticed to shatter their self-confidence.

In contrast, a larger number of female participants recount experiencing body shaming, both on social media and in person. In addition, to facing slurs and biting criticism in public and social gatherings, women report experiencing body shaming on social media. These comments are levelled by friends, family members, and acquaintances. The findings suggest that both men and women are subjected to the hazards of body shaming both on social media and in actual life. Taking it as a normal shade of life, the irony of the matter is those who engage in body shaming do not consider it against human values.

Question 7: This question focuses on the impact of peers' suggestions about physical appearance. This question explores whether these suggestions cause distress, discomfort, or a sigh of relief. A majority of the male participants share their experiences of being discussed in gatherings for their physiques, which included comments about their social status, weight, looks, dressings, eating habits, etc. These suggestions

make them feel self-conscious, lower their self-esteem, and squash them into feelings of discomfort and dismay. Many even express a desire to avoid such circles for staying in mental peace. On the other hand, most of the female participants share their encounters with receiving suggestions about their weight, height, dressings, manners, etc. They are advised to lose weight if they want to find a better life partner. These suggestions face them with their unacceptability in such gatherings. It is noticed such experiences cause them stress and harmful mental effects. Like men, women with healthy and undersized bodies wish to avoid such gatherings to remain peaceful. The findings attest to the fact that both men and women are equally affected by their peers' suggestions about physiques and lifestyles

Question 8: This question revolves around the pressure individuals bear to conform to meet the required societal standards about physical shapes. A majority of male participants express experiencing this pressure to attain a fit physique that is acceptable in public. As a result, they try their level best to transform their physiques into acceptable societal standards. Both skinny and fat guys are associated with masculine weakness for which they receive hurtful comments and embarrassing remarks. In addition to men, women also convey being under pressure to achieve a certain weight/shape to be considered attractive and acceptable. The pressure to maintain a slim and appealing appearance has been so intense that some women resort to crash dieting, which, in turn, takes a toll on their physical and mental health. Women report the reception of this pressure more in degree as compared to men. They are intimidated by different societal taboos which ultimately subject them to societal pressure. Owing to this pressure, they try to conform to the societal standards of feminine physique. In sum, both men

and women experience a sense of obligation to adhere to specific standards of appearance to avoid mockery, evade undesirable attention, and cultivate self-confidence.

Question 9: This question delves into the practicality of keeping up with the trends and ideals of body perfection imposed by social media and society. Despite expressing a strong desire to conform, participants hold differing perspectives. A significant number of male participants regard these trends as unattainable. They believe that celebrities, owing to their luxurious lifestyles and wealth, could effortlessly adopt such trends. In contrast, individuals with work commitments, responsibilities, and families find these trends out of reach due to practical constraints. Some even point out that only the privileged elite could realistically follow these trends who are shorn of day-to-day sundry obstacles. On the other hand, all female participants advocate for a normal physique and lifestyle. They criticize the glorification of ultra-thin bodies, stressing that it erodes individuality. Given the unbearable pressure, it is universally acknowledged that conforming to these societal norms proves unfeasible. The consensus emerges that transitioning from plus size to zero size is an impractical aspiration. Ultimately, participants recognize the stark disparity between the demands of trends and the reality of practical lives.

Question 10: The last question discusses the relationship between happiness and perfection, revealing diverse perspectives among the participants. All male participants unanimously reject the idea that physical perfection leads to happiness in marital or extra-marital arrangements. They believe that genuine happiness stems from within. On the other hand, chasing trends or idolizing celebrities becomes exhausting over time—even celebrities

change with the passage of time. Most female participants share similar viewpoints. They emphasize the importance of finding contentment in one's own form, asserting that happiness is a personal, inner feeling, rather than something attainable through material entities. They acknowledge that social media and societal influences disrupt self-acceptance, making it difficult to cultivate self-love. However, a subset of female participants differ in their stance, associating happiness with societal standards of perfection. This perspective emerges from their negative experiences, where they believe that conforming to these norms could enhance their confidence and self-worth. This view is influenced by societal expectations for women to meet certain physical ideals to increase the chances of their acceptability in society. In short, the participants' views span a spectrum, reflecting the intricate connection between happiness, societal norms, personal beliefs, and individual experiences.

Taking into view the experiences of the participants and their statements, a notable aspect of variation in cultural values is found. All trends and ideals that we (Eastern people) have adopted flow from Western values. In this process, our native cultural values, traditional attire, and heritage often take a back seat. Unfortunately, individuals who continue to uphold these practices face criticism and are labeled as old-fashioned and conservative. Consequently, fewer individuals are familiar with or prioritize their cultural heritage in the contemporary milieu. In different cultures, people have different ideas about what the "ideal" body should look like. In this study, people from various cultures are chosen randomly who experience negative comments about their bodies. Unlike the younger, the older generation does not prefer skinny bodies and hence refuses to believe in the so-called societal body standards. They

take slim figures for weakness, malnourishment, and socio-economic instability.

5. Conclusion

The findings of the study underscore that body shaming, regardless of the form it takes, whether on social media or in real life, significantly undermines the mental health and self-confidence of both men and women. The study highlights the pervasive influence of social media platforms in perpetuating unrealistic beauty standards, which, in return, exacerbate the pressures to conform to the so-called societal standards. This normalization of specific body types and appearances not only marginalizes individuals with diverse physiques but also promotes an environment where self-esteem is tied to fitting into narrowly defined materialistic beauty norms. This, in return, bears serious consequences such as low self-esteem, depression, and a lack of confidence among those who do not conform to them. Furthermore, the study underlines the role of consumerist brands and industries in perpetuating these so-called standards of societal standards about acceptable physical shapes. By doing so, they profit from the victims' insecurities to help them attain the desired appearance. Likewise, the advertising industry capitalizes on these insecurities, reinforcing the harmful cycle of body shaming and unrealistic beauty standards. The findings attest to the fact that the internalization of societal norms and external judgments about body shaming can lead to a discrepancy between one's actual self and their perceived self. This discrepancy fuels negative emotions and mental health issues, driving the urgency to address body shaming and its consequences with possible preventive strategies through awareness and advocacy about the cause. In short, addressing body shaming requires a multi-

faceted approach involving education, media literacy, policy changes, and a collective communal commitment to challenge the in-fashion societal standards, which have the least in common with reality. By doing so, we can pave the way for a more supportive and inclusive culture that bears the potential to accept individuals in their natural shapes.

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