

Body Shaming and its Impact on the Social and Emotional Behaviour of Medical Students at a Medical College in a Metropolitan City

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Abstract

Background: Body shaming is a growing concern among adults. While body shaming targets physical appearance, its impact extends beyond that, negatively affecting a person's mental and physical health, social well-being, and professional life. This study was undertaken to estimate the proportion of body shaming and its impact on the social and emotional behaviour of medical students at a medical college in a metropolitan city. **Methodology:** A cross-sectional study was conducted among the medical students and interns with the help of a semi-structured questionnaire disseminated through digital platform as google form and the required data obtained, analysed and represented as percentage. **Results:** Body shaming was experienced by 164 participants (65.6%), majority being females 121 (73.8%) and 43 (26.2%) males. Majority of the participants 105 (64%) were body shamed for their weight. Body shaming led to mental health impacts like low self-confidence (57.3%), low self-esteem 93 (56.7%), eating disorders 69 (42%), social isolation 59 (35.6%), depression 42 (25.6%) and anger issues 21 (12.8%). Body shaming is significantly associated with multiple negative psychological outcomes in both males and females. While females experience body shaming more frequently, males appear to experience more severe impacts. **Conclusion:** Body shaming as an important public health concern requiring gender-sensitive preventive and supportive interventions. Promoting body positivity is the need of the hour as body shaming has a negative impact on social & emotional behavior of an individual.

Key words: Body shaming, Low self-esteem, Low self-confidence, Eating disorders, Depression

Introduction

Body shaming is making negative or cruel remarks about an individual's body shape, weight, size, colour or body image. It is a form of bullying intended to humiliate a person who is perceived as physically unattractive or does not fit into a societal beauty standard. While body shaming targets physical appearance, its impact extends beyond that, negatively affecting a person's mental and physical health, social well-being, and professional life. Globally, the prevalence of body shaming ranges between 25% and 35%. [1] [2]

Body shaming in adolescence leads to long-term dissatisfaction with weight and appearance, which are in turn associated with depression, anxiety, and lower self-esteem in later years. [3] [4].

A survey conducted in Chennai, India, revealed that 42% of women felt pressured to seem "Beautiful," and 76% desired to have a smaller body size than their current figure. Suicidal ideation due to depression was found to be prevalent in both sexes, although girls were more likely than boys to feel the impulse. [5].

Body shaming on digital platforms is related to cyberbullying, as social media often emphasizes on physical appearance and makes it easy to post hurtful comments about others. The overall message conveyed through social media is that one should strive for the perfect body and find ways to hide their flaws. Body image is a complex construct comprising thoughts, feelings, evaluations, and behaviours related to one's body. Misperceptions of body image are common and lead to several serious diseases, including body dysmorphic disorder, anorexia nervosa, and bulimia nervosa (binge eating or emotional eating for comfort) [6] [7] [8].

Hence this study was undertaken to estimate the proportion of body shaming and its impact on the social and emotional behaviour of medical students at a medical college in a metropolitan city.

Objectives

To estimate the proportion of body shaming and its impact on the social and emotional behaviour of medical students at a medical college in a metropolitan city

Materials and Methods

Study setting: The research was conducted at Ramaiah Medical College, Bangalore.

Study design: Cross-sectional study

Study participants: Medical students and medical interns

Sample Size

The prevalence of body shaming was 45% in a study conducted by Gam RT et al [9], expecting similar results with 95% CI and 6.5% absolute precision, the study required a minimum of 234 subjects.

Sampling methodology

Convenient sampling

Methodology:

This cross-sectional study was conducted among medical students and interns at Ramaiah Medical College, following institutional ethical clearance and obtaining consent from the participants. Data was collected using a semi-structured questionnaire, which included questions on socio-demographic details and knowledge of body shaming, as well as its impact on health. The questionnaire was distributed to participants via Google Forms on a digital platform. The collected data was then entered into Microsoft Excel and analyzed in terms of percentages.

Ethical considerations

The study proposal was approved by the Institutional ethical committee of M S Ramaiah Medical College, Bengaluru.

Results

A total of 250 medical students and interns participated in the study, with a majority being females (172, 68.8%) and the rest males (78, 31.2%). Majority 143 (57.2%) of participants were between the ages of 18 and 20, and 131 (52.4%) were studying in Phase II MBBS. (**Table 1**)

Out of the 250 participants, 245 (98%) were aware of body shaming, and 197 (78.8%) perceived it as a matter of concern. The majority 197 (78.8%) believed that body shaming is very common, with 97 (39.6%) stating that both sexes experience it, though it was more frequently reported among females (135, 55.1%) compared to males (4, 1.6%). Social media 202 (80.8%) was most common for body shaming followed by work place 196 (78.4%), home 118 (47.2%) & educational institutions 97 (38.8%). Comfort with their own body was reported by 151 (61.6%), while 48 (19.5%) expressed discomfort. Irrespective of body image comfort, majority 228 (93.1%) of the participants compared themselves with others. (**Table 2**) Body shaming was experienced by 164 participants (66.9%), including 121 (70.3%) females and 43 (58.9%) males. Majority of the participants, 105 (64%) were body shamed for their weight. Body shaming led to changes in dressing habits, altered body perception, increased self-consciousness about appearance, and negatively impacted both mental and social well-being. Body shaming led to mental health impacts like low self-confidence 84 (51.2%), low self-esteem 93 (56.7%), eating disorders 67 (40.8%), social isolation 59 (35.9%), depression 49 (29.8%) and anger issues 21 (12.8%), being sad 75 (45.7%), development of negative attitude 35 (21.3%), irritability 65 (39.6%), substance abuse 4 (2.4%). (**Table 3**)

A statistical significance association of body shaming was seen with gender, depression, low self esteem, low self confidence and eating disorders.

Embracing one's body, raising awareness about body shaming and its effects, and refraining from judging others based on appearance were some of the suggestions provided by participants to reduce body shaming and promote body positivity. A statistically significant association of body shaming was noted with gender, depression, low self esteem, low confidence and eating disorders.

Depression, low self-esteem, low confidence and eating disorders were commonly reported among both genders; however, a higher proportion was reported among males, this association was statistically significant ($p = 0.02$), ($p = 0.005$), ($p = 0.001$), ($p = 0.009$). (Table 4)

Discussion

A cross-sectional study was conducted among the medical students and interns of Ramaiah Medical College, Bangalore to assess the proportion of body shaming and its impact of mental and social health among them. A total of 250 medical students and interns participated in the study, with a majority being females (172, 68.8%) and the rest males (78, 31.2%). Majority 143 (57.2%) of participants were between the ages of 18 and 20, and 131 (52.4%) were studying in Phase II MBBS.

Body shaming awareness was 245 (98%) among the study participants and 197 (78.8%) knew that it can happen to both the sexes. Social media 202(80.8%) was stated as the most common place for body shaming due to easy accessibility to post the comments followed by work place 196(78.4%), home 118(47.2%) & educational institutions 96 (38.4%).

The proportion of body shaming was found to be 66.9% (164), similar results were obtained from a study conducted by Mondal, in Bangladesh showing the prevalence to be 66.45%. [10]

Majority of the participants 105 (64%) underwent weight teasing, in a study conducted by Neumark, [11] 19% of average-weight girls and 13% of average-weight boys; 45% of overweight girls and 50% overweight boys had been teased frequently about their weight. One third of males and slightly under half of females reported being teased about their weight in a study conducted by M.E. Eisenberg et al [12].

Body shaming led to mental health impacts like low self-confidence 84 (51.2%), low self-esteem 93 (56.7%), eating disorders 67 (40.8%), withdrawal from social life 59 (35.9%), depression 49 (29.8%) anger issues 21 (12.8%) and development of negative attitude 35(21.3%) and substance abuse in 4 (2.4%). Similar impacts were noted in the studies conducted by M.E. Eisenberg et al [11], Fabian LJ [12], and Grilo [13] where low self-esteem was noted among those who were body shamed. Studies conducted by M.E. Eisenberg et al [11], Roth DA et al [14] and Eisenberg et al [15] noted anxiety & depression among the victims of body shaming.

Depression, low self-esteem, low confidence and eating disorders were commonly reported among both genders; however, a higher proportion was reported among males, this association was statistically significant ($p = 0.02$), ($p = 0.005$), ($p = 0.001$), ($p = 0.009$). Although females experience body shaming more frequently,

males show a greater vulnerability to its adverse psychological and behavioral consequences. Study conducted at a university in Multan ,showed a weak, non-significant negative correlation between body shaming and self-esteem , no statistically significant gender differences were observed, although males showed slightly higher self-esteem. [17]

Recommendations

- Conduct awareness programs to educate students about the serious effects of body shaming and recognize it as a public health issue.
- Encourage body positivity: Promote self-acceptance and discourage judging individuals based on physical appearance to challenge unrealistic beauty standards.
- Expand mental health screening and provide gender-sensitive support.
- Establish anti-bullying policies

Conclusion

Body shaming has become a growing concern among adults due to the rise of bullying on social media platformsWhile body shaming targets physical appearance, its impact extends beyond that, negatively affecting a person's mental and physical health, social well-being, and professional life. Raising awareness about body shaming and implementing strategies to address this issue is crucial for promoting body positivity. There is a need for more studies on body shaming among adults, as research in this age group is currently scarce.

Limitation

- Results of this study cannot be generalised, as the study is conducted among students of a medical college.
- Majority of the availablestudies focus on adolescents, making it challenging to compare the results with those of other studies.

Conflict of interest: None

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Tables

Table 1: Demographic profile of the study participants

| Characteristics | Male n (%) | Female n (%) | Total n (%) |
|----------------------|------------------|-------------------|------------------|
| Age | | | |
| 18-20 | 47 (58.8) | 96 (55.8) | 143 (56.8) |
| 21-24 | 30 (37.5) | 71 (41.3) | 101 (40.0) |
| ≥ 25 | 3 (3.7) | 5 (2.9) | 8 (3.2) |
| Total | 80 (31.7) | 172 (68.3) | 252 (100) |
| Year of study | | | |
| I MBBS | 15 (18.7) | 27 (15.7) | 42 (16.7) |
| II MBBS | 46 (57.5) | 87 (50.6) | 133 (52.8) |
| III MBBS Part 1 | 12 (15.0) | 35 (20.3) | 47 (18.6) |
| III MBBS Part 2 | 4 (5.0) | 15 (8.7) | 19 (7.5) |
| Internship | 3 (3.8) | 8 (4.7) | 11 (4.4) |
| Total | 80 (31.7) | 172 (68.3) | 252 (100) |

Table 2: Knowledge of study participants on body shaming

| Characteristics | Male n (%) | Female n (%) | Total n (%) |
|--|-----------------|------------------|------------------|
| Heard of body shaming? | | | |
| Yes | 73 (93.6) | 172 (100) | 245 (98.0) |
| No | 3 (3.8) | 0 (0.0) | 3 (1.2) |
| Unsure | 2 (2.6) | 0 (0.0) | 2 (0.8) |
| Total | 78 (100) | 172 (100) | 250 (100) |
| What is body shaming? *Multiple responses | | | |
| Being judged / mocked based on external appearance | 71 (91.0) | 166 (96.5) | 237 (94.8) |
| Lack of comfort associated with ones own body | 16 (20.5) | 60 (34.9) | 76 (30.4) |
| Aware but don't know what it is | 1 (1.3) | 4 (2.3) | 5 (2.0) |
| Is body shaming a concern at present ? (N=245) | | | |
| Yes | 53 (67.9) | 144 (83.7) | 197 (78.8) |
| No | 5 (6.4) | 14 (8.1) | 19 (7.6) |
| Neutral | 15 (19.2) | 14 (8.1) | 29 (11.6) |
| Total | 73 (100) | 172 (100) | 245 (100) |
| How common is body shaming according to you ? (N=245) | | | |
| Very common | 47 (64.4) | 150 (87.2) | 197 (80.4) |
| Not so common | 22 (30.1) | 14 (8.1) | 36 (14.7) |
| Not sure | 4 (5.5) | 8 (4.7) | 12 (4.9) |
| Total | 73 (100) | 172 (100) | 245 (100) |

| Which gender faces body shaming more ? (N=245) | | | |
|---|-----------|------------|-------------|
| Females | 24 (32.9) | 111 (64.5) | 135 (55.1) |
| Males | 4 (5.5) | 0 (0.0) | 4 (1.6) |
| Both equal | 41 (56.1) | 56 (32.6) | 97 (39.6) |
| Not sure | 4 (5.5) | 5 (2.9%) | 9 (3.7) |
| Total | 73 (100) | 172 (100) | 245 (100) |
| Places where body shaming can occur (N=245) | | | |
| Social media | 55 (70.5) | 147 (85.5) | 202 (80.8%) |
| Workplace | 55 (70.5) | 141 (82.0) | 196 (78.4%) |
| Home | 15 (19.2) | 103 (59.9) | 118 (47.2%) |
| Educational institutions | 23 (29.5) | 74 (43.0) | 97 (38.8%) |
| How comfortable are you with your body? (N=245) | | | |
| Very comfortable | 13 (17.8) | 18 (10.5) | 31 (12.7) |
| Comfortable | 38 (52.1) | 82 (47.7) | 120 (48.9) |
| Neutral | 12 (16.4) | 34 (19.8) | 46 (18.8) |
| Not comfortable | 9 (12.3) | 28 (16.3) | 37 (15.1) |
| Not at all comfortable | 1 (1.4) | 10 (5.8) | 11 (4.4) |
| Total | 73 (100) | 172 (100) | 245 (100) |
| Do you find yourself comparing your body with others ? (N=245) | | | |
| Always | 7 (9.6) | 40 (23.3) | 47 (19.2) |
| Sometimes | 41 (56.2) | 88 (51.2) | 129 (52.7) |
| Rarely | 19 (26.0) | 33 (19.2) | 52 (21.2) |
| Never | 6 (8.2%) | 11 (6.4) | 17 (6.9) |
| Total | 73 (100) | 172 (100) | 245 (100) |

Table 3: Body shaming and its impact among study participants

| Characteristics | Male n (%) | Female n (%) | Total n (%) |
|---|-----------------|------------------|------------------|
| Experience of body shaming (N=245) | | | |
| Yes | 43 (58.9) | 121 (70.3) | 164 (66.9) |
| No | 26 (35.6) | 32 (18.6) | 58 (23.7) |
| Not sure | 4 (5.5) | 19 (11.0) | 23 (9.4) |
| Total | 73 (100) | 172 (100) | 245 (100) |
| Reasons for body shaming (Multiple response) | | | |
| Being overweight | 24 (45.2) | 61 (54.9) | 85 (51.8) |
| Being thin | 8 (15.1) | 12 (10.8) | 20 (12.2) |
| Complexion | 5 (9.4) | 10 (9.0) | 15 (9.1) |
| Appearance | 12 (22.6) | 16 (14.4) | 28 (17.1) |
| Others (Acne, thin hair) | 4 (7.5) | 12 (10.8) | 16 (9.7) |

| Impact (N = 164) | | | |
|--------------------------------------|-----------|-----------|------------|
| Change the way of dressing | 23 (53.5) | 78 (64.5) | 101 (61.6) |
| View your body differently | 19 (44.2) | 87 (71.9) | 106 (64.6) |
| Social media make you feel conscious | 28 (65.1) | 84 (69.4) | 112 (68.3) |
| Mental health and social life | 18 (41.9) | 92 (76.0) | 110 (67.1) |

| Impact on mental health (N = 164) | | | |
|--|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| Low self esteem | 16 (37.2) | 77 (63.6) | 93 (56.7) |
| Low self confidence | 5 (11.6) | 79 (65.3) | 84 (51.2) |
| Depression | 6 (13.9) | 43 (35.5) | 49 (29.8) |
| Social isolation | 12 (27.9) | 47 (38.8) | 59 (35.9) |
| Sad | 11 (25.6) | 64 (52.9) | 75 (45.7) |
| Restricted eating / starving | 5 (11.6) | 39 (32.2) | 44 (26.8) |
| Excessive eating | 4 (9.3) | 19 (15.7) | 23 (14.0) |
| Rage | 8 (18.6) | 13 (10.7) | 21 (12.8) |
| Negative attitude | 8 (18.6) | 27 (22.3) | 35 (21.3) |
| Substance abuse | 3 (7.0) | 1 (0.8) | 4 (2.4) |
| Irritability | 11 (25.6) | 54 (44.6) | 65 (39.6) |

Table 4: Impact of body shaming on mental health and behavioural outcomes by gender

| Gender | Yes | No | P value |
|-------------------------|------------|-----------|---------|
| Body shaming | | | |
| Male | 43 (58.9) | 26 (35.6) | 0.01 |
| Female | 121 (70.3) | 32 (18.6) | |
| Depression | | | |
| Male | 35 (47.9) | 8 (11.0) | 0.02 |
| Female | 77 (44.8) | 44 (25.6) | |
| Low self esteem | | | |
| Male | 28 (38.4) | 15 (20.5) | 0.005 |
| Female | 48 (27.9) | 73 (42.4) | |
| Low confidence | | | |
| Male | 30 (41.4) | 13 (17.8) | 0.001 |
| Female | 48 (27.9) | 73 (42.4) | |
| Eating disorders | | | |
| Male | 38 (52.1) | 5 (6.8) | 0.009 |
| Female | 82 (47.7) | 39 (22.7) | |