



Media, family and colourism: a sociological exploration of body shaming among young women in rural Tamil Nadu

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Abstract

Body shaming refers to the act of disparaging or ridiculing a person's physical appearance. This research paper examines the lived experiences of young women in Tamil Nadu who have faced body shaming, employing a phenomenological approach to elucidate how societal expectations and cultural norms influence their self-perceptions and body image. The study demonstrates the widespread occurrence of body shaming and its considerable adverse effects on the participants' mental and emotional health. The results emphasize the influence of culture and social norms on individuals' body perceptions and the coping mechanisms they employ in response to body shaming. The study concludes by highlighting the necessity of addressing the fundamental causes of body shaming and advocating for body positivity and acceptance.

Keywords: Colourism, Mental health, Emotional well-being, Self-perception, Phenomenology, Colonialism

1. Introduction

Body shaming is one of the most prevalent social phenomena and, hence, significantly affects young women's mental health, self-image, and social relationships. Body shaming is defined as making derogatory remarks about the size, shape, or appearance of someone's body, thereby enforcing stringent beauty standards that society tends to measure against unattainable ideals presented by the media and cultural values. Global beauty standards combine with regional expectations about the skin colour, body shape, and the degree of femininity in determining standards for young women in Chinnalapatti, Tamil Nadu. The more that digital media encompasses society, the more unbearable it is for young minds to view images or videos extolling certain body features as desirable, thereby leading to self-monitoring, diminishing self-esteem, and social alienation among young minds that feel such features unattainable. This research study investigates the experiences of body shaming of young women in the area of Chinnalapatti in detail to know the influence of these structures on their experiences through the family, peer group, and media. This piece uses Cooley's "looking-glass self" and Foucault's "self-surveillance" as points of reference to interpret the case of body shaming through a broad sociological understanding where personal self-concept intersects with societal standards. This study examines the psychosocial effects of body shaming on young women and their coping strategies, which illustrates how societal norms enforce rigid beauty standards and increase stigmatization and psychological suffering among those who do not fit into existing standards.

2. Literature review

Body shaming is highly represented in sociological literature, much attention to which has been devoted regarding beauty

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standards, media impact, and cultural influence. Cultural capital, a concept from Bourdieu, suggests that people gain social value from attributes valued by society, and body size and appearance are often used as a measure of social currency. For example, Lance Peterson (2015) ^[8] distinguished body shaming into social control, where it contributes to the continuation of social stratification, and found that people internalise negative information about themselves that causes mental illness issues like depression and anxiety. Wollast and Riemer (2020) ^[10] examined self-compassion and body surveillance and found that women who are more self-objectified have more body shame and less self-esteem. Studies in India, for instance, by Gam, Singh, and Manar (2020) ^[4] reveal that family and media add to pressures about traditional ideals of bodies since collectivist culture increases pressure from society at large to congregate people around specific sets of characteristics. As identified by Puhl and King's (2021) ^[9] study on weight-based discrimination, body shaming is a collective rather than individualised process stigmatizing the non-compliant individual within society as different. The research contributes to the existing literature by taking a localised rural context perspective on body shaming, particularly how intersectional factors such as skin tone, cultural expectations, and social media influence the coping mechanisms of young women faced with judgments from society concerning their bodies.

3. Methodology

This research is qualitative to explore the experiences and perceptions of body shaming among young women in Chinnalapatti, Tamil Nadu. This research would be descriptive in nature as it would be proper for revealing the intricate manifestations of body shaming and how it impacts the mental

health, self-perception, and social connections among the young women. The study sample comprises 30 purposively selected participants aged 20-25, sourced from the local area and students at Gandhigram Rural University. Semi-structured interviews constitute the principal method of data collection, enabling participants to articulate their experiences comprehensively, with enquiries addressing themes such as familial expectations, media impact, social interactions, and individual coping mechanisms. The final interview guide was developed from a pilot study and contains open- and closed-ended questions that allow for a range of responses. Thematic coding is used in the analysis to identify significant patterns within participants' narratives, particularly around themes of body dissatisfaction, societal standards, and coping strategies. It thereby connects individual experiences of shame to the body with prevailing cultural practices and power relationships in a sociologically alert approach in the analysis of data. This study has some shortcomings. The sample size may be small, and hence the study is geographically confined, which might lessen transferability. The rich results concerning cultural and social aspects affecting the perception of a woman's body in rural Indian society are obtained through such a local focus.

4. Findings

4.1 Media standards

The Media and Standards of Beauty They said the media had made them think about beauty deeply by idealizing very lean, fair-skinned ones, linking those attributes mostly to value in society." Kumudha concurs as she comments, "Each time I watch an ad or a film, it is invariably a very slender female who is considered beautiful. It's like a solitary criterion set for beauty by the media." These representations are examples of cultural hegemony, as espoused by Bourdieu, wherein societal values-promulgated by media-determine that certain body types are more desirable, thereby marginalizing those who do not conform to this ideal. This beauty standard, especially on social media, leads young women to internalise and pursue these ideals, thus entering a cycle of self-comparison and body dissatisfaction. This persistence of standards across all media platforms compels young women to follow unrealistic ideals, creating a cycle in which physical appearance is considered the utmost requirement for self-worth and social acceptance.

4.2 Influence of familial expectations

Family values are one of the major reasons why social beauty standards become more profound, forcing a young girl to embrace it. Selvi remarked, "Currently, there is considerable pressure to possess fair skin, attributed to the proliferation of advertisements for skin-whitening products." "They induce a sense of inadequacy unless one utilises their products." Her experience exemplifies the collectivist familial pressures prevalent in South Asia, where an individual's adherence to beauty standards is frequently linked to the family's social reputation. Family socialization often reflects media-generated values, which then makes young women perceive their worth as being in line with a certain appearance of the body. The interplay between family and media provides substantial

reinforcement of body shaming, increasing self-monitoring and creating feelings of inadequacy and low self-esteem.

4.3 Peer influence and social comparison

Social media reinforces peer influence through conspicuous, often critical comparisons that promote body shaming. She recalls her past experience, "As I scroll through Instagram, I see influencers with perfect bodies and skin." She cannot compare herself with those individuals and would feel the need to transform herself in order to receive acceptance. Based on the social comparison theory, "people compare themselves to some perceived standards of others." Through these online interactions, we would look at them being internalised through symbolic interactionism, and this has an effect on the self-concept as based upon perceived appraisals. Kaliselvi reflected on the same event, saying, "When I shared a photo, people commented about my weight and it made my feeling worse." The quotation shows from social media that thinness is connected to beauty thus causing changes in behaviour changing body aspects among young girls as requested by society. The rise in body dissatisfaction continues due to the availability of societal pressure since they obey society.

4.4 Colourism as an enduring form of racism

The overwhelming theme of colourism - the preference for lighter skin tones - underlines the long shadow of colonial and caste-based legacies in shaping beauty ideals in India. Mala summed up her issues with colourism by saying, "In my upbringing, I was mostly exposed to fair-skinned actors and models, so I used to think darker skin was synonymous with 'less beauty.' I only realised the fallacy of that belief much later." This pressure is a symbol of violence that cultural norms create through subtle perpetuation of discrimination based on colour. Such biases preserve colonial standards of beauty and make fair skin more desirable with greater social worth. Vanitha expressed the implications of this exclusion when she said, "I do not observe individuals resembling me in magazines or films." This exclusion is an example of symbolic annihilation, where the media selectively portrays certain identities while marginalizing others; it suggests that society has determined we are insignificant or non-existent. To them, colourism and bad representation are sources of inadequacy and alienation since they feel the need to change their natural selves to gain acceptance.

4.5 Coping strategies and resilience

Despite the social pressure, most of the participants are actively against body shaming by developing their own strategies to cope. Thangalaxmi was motivated to transform herself when she saw makeover shows: "After watching these makeover programs, it seems that everyone is just one step away from 'correcting' themselves to attain beauty." Her statement encourages one to think about one's inherent value. It is true that the media gives a representation of beauty as an achievable ideal but simultaneously suggests that she is becoming increasingly aware of the limitations of this ideal. Muthuselvi demonstrated the same awareness of the media's fake depiction

of beauty: "When I see these photoshopped pictures, it becomes difficult not to feel the urge to change myself." But impossible to become like an ideal that is not true.

This realization indicates a form of identity resistance, whereby the young women realise that these expectations are unrealistic and culturally constructed. Respondents build resilience against such pressures through self-acceptance, seeking social support, and engaging in body-positive networks. Such strategies are quintessential forms of agency theory, wherein individuals exercise autonomy by rebelling against prevailing discourses and creating an empowering sense of self, even within the context of societal influence.

4.6 Symbolic exclusion and demand for representation

Some of the participants reported feelings of being invisible or marginalised by mainstream media due to a lack of diversity in body types and skin tones. Vanitha said, "I do not see people like me in magazines or movies." Society has apparently reached a consensus that we are irrelevant in the grand scheme, so this further magnifies how symbolic annihilation leads on to the effects by forming an illusion of non-apparency among people whom the media deems inapplicable to normal norms of beauty. The lack of such diversified representations creates the idea that only a few appearances are acceptable or desirable, which further perpetuates feelings of inadequacy and social isolation. Young women like Vanitha and Mala are excluded from media narratives, which further worsens body dissatisfaction because their identities are not worthy of public acknowledgment. Diversified media representation would give these persons positive role models, leading to a sense of belonging and acceptance.

The demand for greater representation by the participants in the study indicates a desire for broader beauty standards that reflect real diversity, thereby reducing body shaming and promoting positive self-esteem.

5. Analysis and Discussion

5.1 Media as primary agent of socialization

Shaping and Distributing Beauty Standards The analysis of participant quotes reveals the prominent role of the media as a socializing agent that establishes and widely communicates beauty standards. Kumudha and Selvi pointed out that all media channels, such as advertisements, movies, and social media, portray narrow standards of beauty, often emphasizing slenderness, fairness, and blemish-free skin. This media-based enforcement of beauty standards illustrates how, in a hegemonic culture, dominant social values are promoted by powerful organizations, in this case, the media.

Hegemony theory, as put forth by Antonio Gramsci, states that dominant ideals penetrate everyday consciousness as "natural" or "objective" truths.

For these young women, the media establishes an ideal beauty that becomes internalised as one to be achieved despite the negative effects on their self-perceptions. The repetition of slender, light-skinned figures through the different platforms makes it normative for society to look this way, therefore silently excluding and marginalizing those outside of its

parameters. It fits the role of media as a socializing agent, since participants assessed themselves from this frame of reference and were often pressured into looking that way to gain validity and acceptance.

The normalizing role of the media is such that beauty standards may transcend personal preferences to define self-concepts highly influenced by socially reinforced ideals.

5.2 Internalised social comparison within symbolic interactionism

The desire for social comparison, as seen in the quotes of Pushpalatha and Thangalaxmi, is one prime example of the basic tenet of symbolic interactionism-the theory that holds that individual identities are created through interactions and interpretations of others' behaviours. Social media becomes a tool for constant comparison, thus perpetuating a culture where self-esteem is tied to the appearance-driven approval of others. Festinger's social comparison theory of people judges self-esteem through comparison with others, but only with the people they perceive as "ideal."

For example, how Pushpalatha feels about themselves by browsing through pictures of influencers in Instagram. It is this constant consumption of the ideal aesthetic that carries an impression of inadequacy in the minds of people like Pushpalatha and Muthuselvi in comparison to the impossible standards created by social standards due to digital manipulation. Such images are highly pervasive and create a space for the "ideal self" to be gauged against distorted reality. This is related to the idea of the looking-glass self where people see themselves through the prism of an idealised "other" internalizing societal appraisals and thereby promoting body dissatisfaction.

5.3 Colourism and the commercialization of aesthetics

The observations by Selvi and Mala show intense colourism, in that light skin is related with beauty and high social values, especially in those historical contexts that are influenced by a colonial past. The commercialisation of beauty through whitening agents and white-skinned people in the media enhances these forms of discrimination. Aspects of the body become items of commerce in the context of the highly advertised commodity products that promise to fit users into certain standards of beauty. Selvi's analysis of skin-whitening advertisements illustrates how media exploits societal insecurities, with corporations reinforcing the belief that lighter skin is intrinsically superior. By profiting from appearance-related insecurities, the media cultivates a consumerist urge to attain social acceptance, thereby deepening class and racial prejudices. This commodification not only illustrates the consumerist foundations of contemporary capitalism but also corresponds with Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital.

It is in this commodification process that social capital accrues to the "ideal" aesthetic but leaves others feeling inferior or deficient. This reinforces structurally inequitable frameworks since it values more specific physical attributes and perpetuates socioeconomic barriers to access social acceptance.

5.4 Self-tracking and the panopticon of social media

Pakkialatchumi, Kaliselvi, and other interpretations show self-surveillance as a major theme. The panopticon theory of Michel Foucault, a construct that creates perpetual visibility and self-regulation, provides a major framework to understand how people watch and change their behaviour to align with the norms of society. Social media enhances this phenomenon by providing a constant platform for people to post, share, and comment on images and videos.

It planted within the participants a desire to conform and control their look so as not to face examination or judgment.

Kalishelvi's experience, where she begins receiving comments on her physiology and is forced to wear a "socially acceptable" garb, hints at how social media instigates self-discipline. User self-monitoring is neither just for the sake of users' personal standards but also those of a virtual audience.

This corresponds to Foucault's understanding of "docile bodies," wherein social norms force citizens into molding their bodies and activities according to set standards. For these people, the social media site is their field where beauty standards are imposed on them ceaselessly along with self-regulatory measures designed to avoid unfavourable appraisals.

5.5 Marginalization and symbolic annihilation in media representation

Quotations from Vanitha and Mala reflect the concept of symbolic annihilation, defined as the media's tendency to erase or marginalise groups that do not fit into prevailing beauty standards. According to Gerbner's theory, under-represented groups are either completely absent or represented in stereotypical, often stigmatised roles.

The personal cost of such exclusion is very well portrayed through Vanitha's perception of invisibility in magazines and films. In the absence of representation, people do not get positive social affirmation or a feeling of inclusion within the mainstream.

Symbolic annihilation for these subjects reinforces the notion that only a certain "kind" of person-slender, light-skinned, and conventionally beautiful-is worth making visible in society.

Such tendencies breed inadequacy and exclusion because people begin to look at the lack of representation as a measure of their value in society. Exclusion on body and skin tones breeds the media beauty standard that delegitimizes nonconformity; hence, there's the development of a restricting beauty definition that marginalises full sections of the demographics.

This has the function of reinforcing a pyramid of social order, preferring certain aesthetics and thus signalling to the audience that divergence from the ideal will lead to social invisibility.

5.6 Convergence of commodification and self-esteem

Communications as carried by makeover shows and photo-shopped pictures carry the message that one's beauty can be reached solely through consumption; transforming oneself is the only pathway toward self-acceptance. This content recodes the value of self by the body, pushing persons to "correct" themselves by consumption to receive societal approbation.

This can be seen through the makeover media experiences of participants on how capitalist ideologies of enhancement and consumption intersect with identity. Self-worth is something to be achieved through consumer goods or modified appearances, thus making beauty a personal and commercial activity. Foucault terms this biopower, wherein the institutions of society create norms which individuals internalise, thereby exerting control over the bodies to the benefit of the beauty industry. This is a quest for an idealised self-anchored on outerly defined beauty and thus resonates with Goffman's impression management theory where people are driven to create a socially acceptable self. Self-esteem thus depends more on achieving physical perfection as commercialised beauty demands.

5.7 Resistance and identity recovery

Participants expressed frustrations and challenges, but a resounding theme of resistance was made evident, particularly through recognition of the artificiality of and social construction of beauty criteria. Participants like Muthuselvi spoke of having paradoxical desires for artificially manipulated images, knowing all along that they were being fed something that was an artificial construct, yet seeing its effects. This view is in line with identity theory, which posits that when people are educated on the social construction of some norms, they develop the ability to challenge and reorganise their concept of themselves. For Muthuselvi and many others, this awareness has become a form of resistance against the traditional expectations of beauty culture. Vanitha's sense of difference that makes her beautiful beyond what the media would classify has developed into a self-concept strongly grounded in autonomy. Resistance is expressed in words, meaning that, while the actors are socially influenced, they form a counter-narrative against the dominant ideal, by which they make claims about their identities on their own terms. It sounds close to postmodern identity theory: individuals refuse uniform norms and instead embrace diverse, multidimensional self-understandings that deconstruct dominant ideals.

6. Conclusion

These are rather candid participant experiences about the socially constructed content of beauty standards and the fact that these greatly shape self-conception, identity, and mental health. The culture that emerges with media, social comparison, commodification, self-surveillance, and symbolic annihilation all go towards creating this culture of the unattainable beauty standard. Though these often trigger self-regulatory behaviours and reduced self-esteem and social exclusion, there is an ongoing counter movement of reclaiming one's identity that critiques dominant discourses. These themes illustrate, thus from the qualitative point of view of sociology, how beauty is a symbolic arena for societal norms, individual identities, and capitalist influences to blend together. Here, the respondents' answers underscore complex interactions between societal expectations and self-determination demonstrating that beauty ideals are neither an intrinsic reality nor absolute

necessity but, rather, a culturally imposed construct being increasingly scrutinised and challenged.

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