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**Dr. J Maria Agnes Sasitha**  
Head of the Department,  
Department of Sociology,  
Stella Maris College, Chennai,  
Tamil Nadu, India

**Dr. Shanmugapriya S**  
Assistant Professor,  
Department of Sociology,  
Stella Maris College, Chennai,  
Tamil Nadu, India

**Austrinev Ricolin RM**  
Research scholar, Department  
of Sociology, Stella Maris  
College, Chennai, Tamil Nadu,  
India

**Corresponding Author:**  
**Dr. J Maria Agnes Sasitha**  
Head of the Department,  
Department of Sociology,  
Stella Maris College, Chennai,  
Tamil Nadu, India

## A study on body shaming among school-going adolescents in the Tiruvallur district of Tamil Nadu

**Dr. J Maria Agnes Sasitha, Dr. Shanmugapriya S and Austrinev Ricolin RM**

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### Abstract

Body shaming is the act of saying something negative about a person's body. People who don't fit into the beauty standards constructed by our society experience body shaming. The study population of this research is Adolescents who are in the age group 10 to 19. The aims of this study are to identify the existence of body shaming among school-going adolescents and to find out the impact of body shaming on the victim's patterns and actions. Finally, to identify the relation between body shaming and the victim's urge to change their presentation of appearance. For this study, the primary data was collected from 149 school-going adolescents from three schools in Tiruvallur District, Tamil Nadu, India. The present study found that body shaming exists among school-going adolescents and the overall prevalence of body shaming found out in this study is 72 percent. This study found that body shaming has a considerable impact on its victim's patterns and actions. Many victims of body shaming avoid meeting the body shamer and avoid visiting the place where they are body shamed. This study also found that 58 percent of adolescents have the urge to change or improve their presentation of physical appearance due to body shaming.

**Keywords:** Body shaming, adolescents, beauty standards, physical appearance

### Introduction

Body shaming is the act of saying something negative about a person's body (Mukherjee, 2022) <sup>[5]</sup>. It is a form of bullying where a person's body is targeted. Body shaming is one of the serious issues in our society which is often unnoticed. Because it is normalised in our society. According to a study conducted by Gam *et al.* (2020) <sup>[2]</sup>, 44.9% of adolescents experience body shaming. Another study conducted by Mukherjee (2022) <sup>[5]</sup> found that 74% of the adolescents who are the victims of body shaming have the urge to suicide. This shows the magnitude of the problem.

Every human being in this world has a unique physical appearance. It is determined by their genetics and lifestyle. But our society has constructed certain beauty standards. People who don't fit into those standards experience body shaming. When we look back into history, the beauty standards constructed by our society have changed from time to time. In the olden days, larger bodies were considered ideal. Because larger bodies are associated with wealth. A person who has access to good food and one who doesn't need to work physically hard have a larger body and it was seen as the ideal body shape. Whereas, smaller bodies are associated with poverty. But in modern times, weight is not associated with wealth. Nowadays larger bodies are associated with laziness whereas smaller bodies are associated with good health, which is also incorrect.

The beauty standards constructed by our society are reemphasised by celebrities through magazines, advertisements, TV shows, social media applications, and other types of media. In addition to this, many body shaming comments were used in movies which in turn affects society (Nagappan, 2021) <sup>[6]</sup>. People watching such body shaming comments use it in their real lives. Further, many commercial advertisements of the cosmetic industry portray the ideal body and urge the viewers to make themselves fit into the so-called 'ideal body image'. They use the celebrity's unrealistic and unattainable bodies to promote their product.

The revenue of the cosmetic industry in India amounts to US \$ 6.27bn in 2023 and it is expected to grow annually by 2.87% (CAGR 2023-2028). This shows how the cosmetic industry makes people victims of the beauty standards constructed by our society.

The study population of this research is Adolescents. According to WHO the term 'Adolescence' refers to anyone in the age group 10 to 19. In this phase, the human body undergoes a lot of physical, sexual, and psychological changes (Gam *et al.* 2020) [2]. Due to these changes, individuals may become victims of body shaming. In addition to this, in this technologically driven world, most of the teenagers are active users of social media sites. They come across the so-called perfect body shapes of celebrities through various kinds of media. It has a considerable amount of impact on adolescents. This may be one of the reasons for the use of body shaming comments among adolescents. Due to these comments, teenagers may feel bad about their physical appearance. Some may even try to make themselves fit into the so-called ideal body shape. They may attempt to change their physical appearance by changing their eating habits or by using beauty products or cosmetics. According to a study conducted by Jiotsa *et al.* (2021) [4], the widespread use of social media among teenagers and young adults could increase body dissatisfaction as well as their drive for thinness, therefore rendering them more vulnerable to eating disorders. On the other hand, the victims of body shaming may try to improve their virtual appearance by editing their photos. This is a serious concern. Because people are not willing to show their original appearance to others on social media. They portray their fake appearance. Hence this research focuses on the relationship between body shaming and the adolescent's urge to change their presentation of appearance. Body shaming could also have an impact on the way people interact with others. So, this research aims to find out the impact of body shaming on the victim's patterns and actions.

This research study was conducted among school-going adolescents of Tiruvallur District, Tamil Nadu, India. The primary data was collected using questionnaire from 149 students of three schools in Tiruvallur District.

### Objectives of the study

1. To identify the existence of body shaming among school-going adolescents.
2. To find out the impact of body shaming on the victim's patterns and actions.

3. To identify the relation between body shaming and the victim's urge to change their presentation of appearance.

### Research Methodology

#### Research design

The present study is a hybrid study which is a combination of both qualitative and quantitative research methods. The hybrid method was chosen for this study because it gives both statistical data as well as the scope for the in-depth analysis of the personal experiences of the respondents.

#### Tool of data collection

The questionnaire was used to collect primary data. The researcher prepared the questionnaire and it was corrected by the research supervisor. The pilot study was done with five samples. Based on the pilot study further corrections were made in the questionnaire. The questionnaire consists of both close-ended and open-ended questions.

#### Population and sample

The population of this research comes under the category of 'Adolescent' who are in the age category 10 to 19 according to the World Health Organisation, from Tiruvallur District of Tamil Nadu. The samples of this study are school-going adolescents who are studying between 9th and 12th standard.

#### Sampling and sample selection

For this research study, the primary data was collected directly from the schools of Tiruvallur District. The schools were selected using the Stratified Random Sampling method and the data was collected from one co-ed school and two single-gender schools.

The samples for the primary data collection were selected using Voluntary Response Sampling. A basic introduction about the research and research topic was given to the students. Students who were willing to answer the questionnaire were selected as the samples. The primary data was collected from 149 school-going adolescents.

#### Results of the study

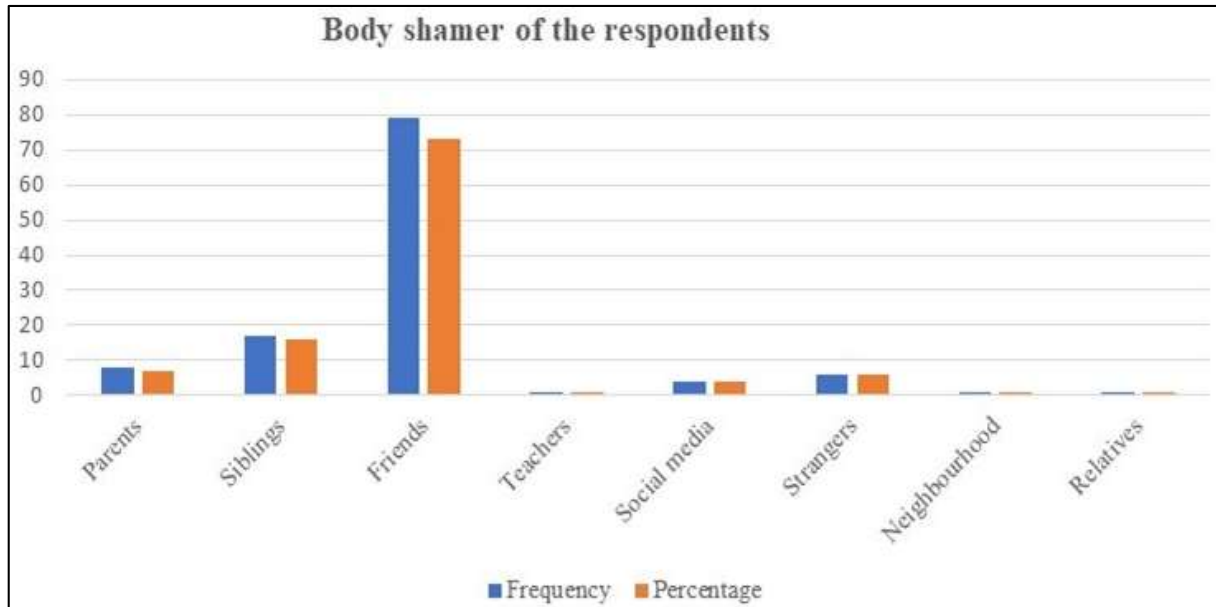
In the present study, it is found that body shaming exists among school-going adolescents to a large extent. The overall prevalence of body shaming found in this study is 72% (Table 1).

**Table 1:** Frequency distribution of the respondents based on their experience of body shaming

Experienced Body Shaming	Male		Female	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	19	31	34	39
Maybe	24	39	31	35
No	18	30	23	26
Total	61	100	88	100

A majority of 73% of the respondents are body shamed by their friends. It is followed by siblings, parents, strangers,

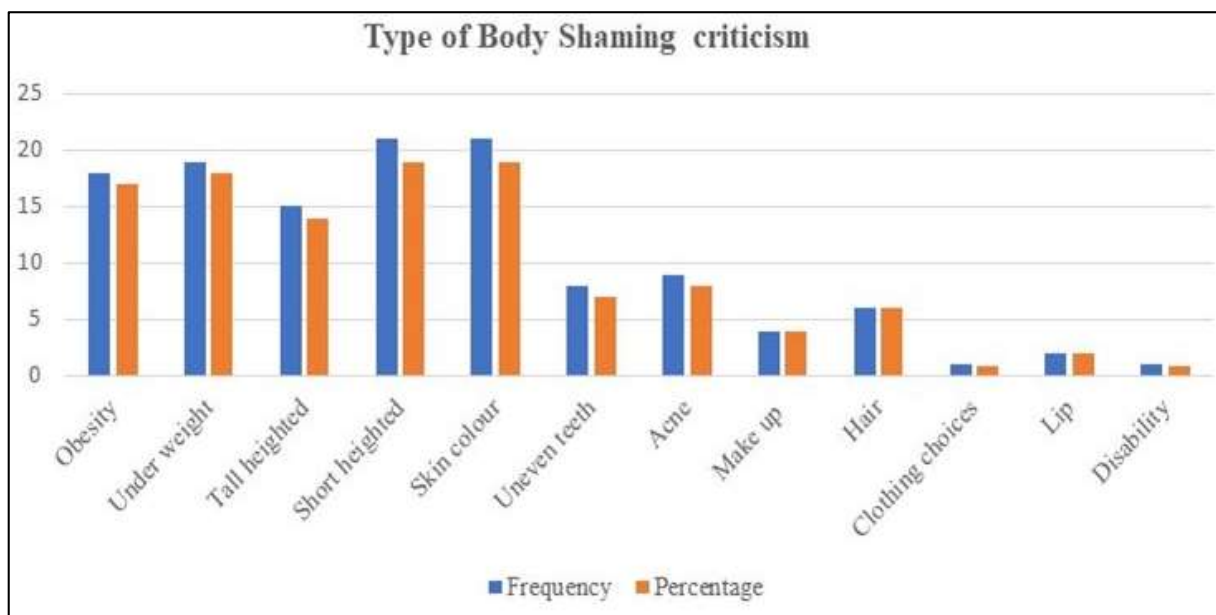
social media, teachers, relatives, and neighbours (Figure 1).



**Fig 1:** Bar diagram representing the body shamer of the respondents

This study found that 19% of the respondents are body shamed due to their skin colour and shortness of height. It is followed by underweight, obesity, tallness in height, acne,

uneven teeth, hair, make-up, lip, clothing choices, and disability (Figure 2).



**Fig 2:** Bar diagram representing the type of body shaming criticism faced by the respondents

This study found that body shaming has a considerable impact on its victim’s patterns and actions. 49% of victims of body shaming face discrimination based on their physical appearance. It indicates that the victims of body shaming are also subjected to discrimination due to their physical appearance. The present study found that 32% of adolescents avoid engaging in certain activities such as sports, and dance due to the fear of being body-shamed. The fear of being body-shamed acts as a barrier to the development of their talents and curtails their opportunities. 28% of adolescents avoid meeting the body shamer due to the fear of being body-shamed. As well as many adolescents avoid speaking with their own classmates who body shame them. And 32% of adolescents avoid visiting certain places where they are body-shamed. It is also found that body

shaming has affected adolescents to an extent that they even avoid going to school due to the fear of body shaming comments. It indicates the high magnitude of the issue among adolescents. This study found that body shaming comments lead to feelings of sadness and a decline in self-esteem among adolescents. 42% of the adolescents feel sad when body shamed and 31% of adolescents feel that their self-esteem decreases when body shamed. The decline in self-esteem is associated with low body satisfaction and an inferiority complex.

The present study found that body shaming is related to adolescent’s urge to change their presentation of appearance. Almost 58% of adolescents have the urge to change or improve their physical appearance due to body shaming (Table 2).

**Table 2:** Frequency distribution of the attempt made by the respondents to change or improve their physical appearance due to body shaming

Changes made in physical appearance	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	36	33
Maybe	27	25
No	45	42
Total	108	100

It is also found that they take several measures such as changing their eating habits, using beauty products or cosmetics, etc. to change their physical appearance. Almost 41% of adolescents tried to change their eating habits due to body shaming. 37% of adolescents use filtered photos to change or enhance their virtual appearance. 31% of adolescents use beauty products or cosmetics to change or improve their physical appearance. 28% of adolescents tried to change their skin colour due to body shaming and 16% of adolescents avoid wearing certain dresses due to the fear of body shaming.

These are the salient findings of this research study. From these findings, it is evident that body shaming exists among adolescents and it has a considerable impact on their patterns and actions. It is also evident that body shaming urges its victims to change their presentation of appearance. Clearly, it is not a healthy situation. The results of this study show the need and importance of spreading body positivity.

## Discussion

### Body shaming among school-going adolescents

The overall prevalence of body shaming found in this study is 72%. It is higher than the results of the previous studies. The research conducted by Gam *et al.* (2020) [2] found that the prevalence of body shaming among school-going adolescents in Lucknow was 44.9%. Another study conducted by Beevi & Nazeer (2022) [1] in Kerala found that the prevalence of body shaming among college students was 67.9%. The result of the present study shows the magnitude of the issue in Tamil Nadu. It highlights the need for specific interventions to curtail the use of body shaming comments among school-going adolescents.

It is found that a majority of 73% of the respondents are body shamed by their friends. It is followed by siblings, parents, strangers, social media, teachers, relatives, and neighbours. However, a study conducted by Beevi & Nazeer (2022) [1] among college students found that 46.4% of the students had experienced body shaming from family members and 53.6% of the students were body shamed by people outside the family. Friends are the most prominent body shamers as per the findings of this study. This indicates that most of the appearance-based harassment occurs in the school and playground. This alarming fact shows the need for educational institutions to take several measures to stop the body shaming comments among students.

It is also found that 19% of the respondents are body shamed due to their skin colour and shortness of height. It is followed by underweight, obesity, tallness in height, acne, uneven teeth, hair, make-up, lip, clothing choices, and disability. However, a study conducted by Mukherjee (2022) [5] found that the maximum amount of shaming is done on the grounds of body weight. Body shaming related to the specific aspects of physical appearance occurs when those aspects of physical appearance don't fit into the beauty standards constructed by our society. It is a serious concern.

It is also found that body shaming comments lead to feelings of sadness and a decline in self-esteem among adolescents. 42% of the adolescents feel sad when body shamed. However, a study conducted by Beevi & Nazeer (2022) [1] found that 71.4% of college students felt sad when they were subjected to body shaming. From this, it can be derived that adolescents are more able to withstand bullying than the youth. It also indicates that the sad feeling due to body shaming increases as they grow. 31% of adolescents feel that their self-esteem decreases when body shamed. The decline in self-esteem can impact both personal as well as professional life. It can lead to an inferiority complex.

### Impact of body shaming on adolescent's patterns and actions

It is found that 49% of victims of body shaming face discrimination based on their physical appearance. Some respondents have said that they were excluded from sports and dance due to their physical appearance. Since all the respondents are school-going adolescents, it shows how the school managements are very partial and discriminate students based on their physical appearance. Curtailing the opportunities of students at a young age due to their physical appearance can downsize the growth of their skills and it is a barrier for adolescents to exhibit their talents.

The present study found that 32% of adolescents avoid engaging in certain activities due to the fear of being body-shamed. The various activities avoided by the respondents are singing, sports, dance and even running. The fear of being body-shamed confines adolescents to engage in a considerable number of activities. It curtails their opportunities and limits the growth of their talents.

It is found that 28% of adolescents avoid meeting the body shamer due to the fear of being body-shamed. Some respondents have mentioned that they avoid speaking with their own classmates and avoid meeting their relatives who body shame them. The fear of meeting the body shamer affects the social well-being of adolescents.

32% of adolescents avoid visiting certain places where they are body-shamed. Many victims of body shaming avoid visiting essential places like school, family functions, and relative's houses, and sometimes they even fear going out of their homes. Few respondents avoid going to school due to body shaming. It can lead to dropout. This shows the magnitude of the problem. Avoiding school due to body shaming has a life-long impact. It is a serious concern and it should be tackled efficiently.

### Relation between body shaming and the urge to change the presentation of appearance

The present study found that body shaming is related to adolescent's urge to change their presentation of appearance. Almost 58% of adolescents have the urge to change or improve their physical appearance due to body shaming.

Many respondents have said that they do exercise and eat healthy food like fruits, and nuts to improve their physical

appearance. The various activities engaged by the respondents to change or improve their appearance are skipping, running, playing kabaddi, joining badminton classes, etc. Almost, 41% of the adolescents tried to change their eating habits due to body shaming. Some respondents have said that they eat fruits, nuts, protein-rich foods and avoid junk and oily food to enhance their physical appearance. On the other hand, some respondents have reduced the intake of food and sometimes even avoided intake of food. Adolescence is a phase where drastic physical changes occur. If the body gets inadequate nutrition at this vital period then it can affect their health. Hence, body shaming affects the physical well-being of the adolescents.

37% of adolescents use filtered photos to change or enhance their virtual appearance. Many respondents have mentioned that they use filters to change the colour in their photos and also many respondents use the Snapchat application to enhance their virtual beauty. It is evident that many teenagers desire to have a fair complexion. Most of the photo filter applications work by emphasising the beauty standards constructed by our society. The victims of body shaming in an attempt to fit into the beauty standards use these photo filter applications.

31% of adolescents use beauty products or cosmetics to change or improve their physical appearance. The respondents use both homemade beauty products and cosmetics to enhance their physical appearance. When it comes to natural beauty products it mostly doesn't affect health but overuse of cosmetics can lead to a lot of health issues. The cosmetic industry is growing every year by making people victims of the beauty standards of society. The commercial advertisements of the cosmetic industry urge people to attain an ideal body image. Hence, the cosmetic industry indirectly contributes to the social evil called body shaming.

28% of adolescents tried to change their skin colour due to body shaming. Respondents have mentioned that they watch YouTube videos and make home remedies to change their skin colour. And few respondents even take medicine to become fair complexion due to body shaming. It indicates the magnitude of the problem. Because taking medicines unnecessarily just to become fair can lead to health issues.

16% of adolescents avoid wearing certain dresses due to the fear of body shaming. Respondents have mentioned that they avoid wearing T-shirts, jeans, and sleeveless dresses due to body shaming. It indicates that body shaming comments don't let the victims wear certain dresses that they like. It restricts their clothing choices and their liberty to choose what they want.

When asked about like whom they wish to change their appearance many respondents mentioned the names of actors, actresses, and sports persons. This indicates the huge influence of the celebrities on the adolescents. Celebrities make the beauty standards of society much more rigid.

### Conclusion

As per American Sociologist Charles Horton Cooley's Looking Glass Self theory, we consider who we are based on what we presume others think of us. Similarly, the repeated hearing of body shaming comments over and over again makes its victims think that they are abnormal and not up to the level of the beauty standards constructed by our society. Body shaming is a social evil that must be properly

tackled. This research focuses on the existence of body shaming among school-going adolescents and its impacts on the victim's patterns and actions. It also focussed on the relationship between body shaming and its victim's urge to change their presentation of appearance. This study found the prevalence of body shaming among school-going adolescents as 72% which is higher than previous studies and it found the impact of body shaming on various factors. This study is a cross-sectional study conducted in three schools of Tiruvallur District. The responses of 149 adolescents were analysed and results were derived from it. This study unveiled the need for initiating awareness programs for school students to curtail the harmful effects of body shaming. Since it is one of the first studies on the topic in Tamil Nadu, it is hoped that more studies will be undertaken on body shaming or appearance-based harassment in the future.

### Recommendations

- In educational institutions students must be taught about body positivity and strict rules must be enforced to curtail body shaming comments among students.
- Educational institutions can give counselling to the victims of body shaming and help them to accept themselves as they are.
- Mass media particularly movies should avoid body shaming comments. Because it has a considerable impact on society.
- Since most of the students have celebrities as their role models and wish to change their appearance like them, mass media should take measures to spread body positivity and avoid portraying and emphasizing of ideal body image.

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