Contemporary Society and the Act of Body Shaming: A Critical Discourse on Perceptions of Beauty and Shame within the Indian Society

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Abstract

Body shaming as a growing vice has been garnering attention around the world. It has been associated to being a means of violence, bias as well as humiliation of individuals, who do not fit the 'normalized appearance' notions of the society. As something that affects democratic foundations of an inclusive society, body shaming is becoming a growing threat to individuals, their self-perception as well as their mental, physical, and emotional health. This paper explores and reports the findings of a qualitative study, conducted in order to understand the perception of the Indian society on notions of beauty and body shaming, that lead to perpetuation of this vice. The study employed the use of Discourse Analysis on 1034 comments. These comments were associated with various articles present on the Facebook media page of Youth Ki Awaaz (user-generated Indian youth media platform on social justice issues). The comments within the platform, on articles pertaining to body shaming, were analyzed using Critical Discourse. The perceptions of the user base with regards to the concept of beauty, body stereotypes and body shaming were further brought to light.

Keywords. Body shaming, Inclusive society, Cyber-crime, Fundamental freedom

1. INTRODUCTION

Weight and appearance-based discrimination has been closely associated with being a means of perpetuating oppression of members within the society (Fathi, 2011). In a democracy like India, where discrimination of any form is prohibited, there is a lack of awareness about the concept of body shaming as well as provisions to tackle the same. Body shaming in the contemporary times is emerging as a social vice that is leading to abuse and mockery of people, due to their unique differences from the widely accepted norms of beauty around the world. As per Cambridge dictionary, body shaming entails the act of criticizing an individuals' physical appearance. Research has revealed that people from all genders, including males, females as well as members of the LGBTQIA+ community, have been subjected to body shaming (Shain, 2016). This is a significant pointer at the failure to form an inclusive society within the country, where there is acceptance of people's diversities.

Despite having been identified as a rising contemporary issue in various countries, there is still lack of awareness among people about what constitutes body shaming and how it is propagated unknowingly, as well as purposefully. It has been recognized as a crime persisting under bullying across many countries around the world, due to the extreme effects it has on individuals. There is immense ignorance among people regarding the mental, physical, emotional, and social effects that the victims of body shaming experience. Review of available literature has revealed various aspects of trauma and sickness associated with the act of body shaming. It has been found to be closely linked with increased Bulimic and Anorexic symptoms, which are two extreme forms of eating disorders (Dally et.al., 2019). It has further been connected with shifts in dietary habits, leading to negative effects on individual health and well-being (Kar, 2019). The above-mentioned are grouped as certain physical indicators of the negative effects of body shaming. Furthermore, binge eating has been identified as a way of coping with mental trauma about shame, among the victims. In recent times, studies around the world have thrown light on the negative effects of discriminatory societal perceptions on beauty. It has been revealed that as a result of wanting to fit into the world's beauty standards a significant amount of female population is constantly trying to lose weight. In case of male members of the society, efforts are made to achieve muscular bodies and facial hair. The mockery resulting from the absence of these has been found to be a major predictor of eating disorder among adolescent boys and girls (Mustapic, Marcinko and Vargek, 2016). In addition to studying the concept of body shaming as a whole, there is a need to understand its propagation among various genders, including males. Certain studies have revealed how body dissatisfaction and shame cause men to have strained social as well as romantic relationships. This has been pointed out as a significant indicator of understanding male body shaming within the society (Cole, Davidson, and Gervais, 2013). Subjection of females into shame and guilt about their appearance has been identified as a means of oppression of the females within a patriarchal society. They have been described as 'anchors' that keep women under control (Atik, 2014).

Apart from the physical effects, victims of body shaming have been found to suffer from a range of mental health conditions, issues in social relationships etc. Among adolescents, a significant fall in self-esteem, decreased social connections and onset of mental health issues and self-doubt has been observed as a result of body shaming (Gam et.al., 2020). The dispensing of trauma on to one's own body has also been talked about in relation to the same. It has been revealed that being exposed to body shaming leads to an increase in negative self-concept, which is then displaced by the individuals onto their own bodies. This displacement and hate become the cause of increased depressive symptoms within the victims (Woodward, McIlwain and Mond, 2017). All this has been observed as factors that pave way to self-objectification as well as increased material pursuit and body dissatisfaction (Sun, 2018).

The role of media as a major propagator of promoting falsified body standards has been pointed out by various studies in the recent years. Portrayal of idealized body images on media platforms has been associated with spreading appearance anxiety among viewers (Monro and Huon, 2005). Increased involvement with the appearance standards of social media was found to cause low self-esteem and increased body consciousness among both men and women (Manago et.al.,2014). It has been discovered that exposure to unrealistic body standards on social media as well as being shamed online by cyber-bullies on their appearance, cause low self-esteem in adolescents. This in turn leads to dependence on 'image control' on social media sites. This is achieved through the use of filters and editing techniques that help contain the imperfections and blemishes that the victims perceive within their photographs (Gioia, Griffiths and Boursier, 2020). Studies show that when the norms of a society are constructed through a patriarchal or hierarchal perspective, exertion of power is used to keep the masses under control. This use of power is what dictates the rules of the society. In such a place, the minority are oppressed and shamed for who they are, as they do not fit into the constructed notions of perfection. This in turn is a threat to an individuals' fundamental freedom to exist as they are, as well as a violation of basic human rights. Research has further revealed how in such society's violence, oppression of the weak and shaming has been used as a means of exerting control and dominance (S.G., 2018).

The above-mentioned studies highlight the importance of understanding the construct of body shaming, its effects, and the need to curb it. The paper is an attempt to report the study conducted for understanding people's perception in India, with regards to 'norms of beauty,' 'body shaming,' and the propagation of these perceptions through social media platforms leading to further victimization. It discusses the findings related to a) What are the perceptions related to beauty and body image in India? b) What are peoples' perceptions in India on body shaming? & c) How are these perceptions being propagated through comment sections of online media platforms?

2. METHODOLOGY

The study made use of the qualitative research technique of Critical Discourse, which comes under Discourse Analysis. Discourse analysis employs the study of written or spoken language in relation to the existing societal perceptions, beliefs, and ideologies (Luo, 2019). It is used to deconstruct the text or oral statement in light of a particular context, in order to understand the ideas that led to the formation of the speaker's opinion. Critical Discourse is a part of Discourse Analysis that focuses on understanding social issues based on people's perceptions on them. It focuses on understanding society through its influence on people's belief system, thereby drawing a connection between society, culture, and written or spoken language (Ifversen 2003). The technique was employed in the study to deconstruct written language available in the form of comments. These comments belonged to the articles on body shaming, found on the Facebook page of Youth Ki Awaaz (an online media platform that covers issues of social injustice). These

comments were further analyzed using the method of critical discourse, in order to understand the prevailing notions about beauty and body shaming in India, as well as their propagation online. For selection of the data, the Facebook page of Youth Ki Awaaz was accessed. Further, commands were run to search for articles under the key word 'body shaming.' 1034 comments, spanning over 8 articles were selected for the study, after exclusion on the basis of comment thread availability as well as congruence with the research purpose. These were published between the years 2016 to 2017. Body shaming is a rising social issue within the contemporary scenario that could rattle the foundation of peaceful and fair societies. As the media platform of Youth Ki Awaaz focuses on issues of social justice, including articles with firsthand experiences of victims with body shaming, the decision was made to utilize the comments under the same for the purpose of the study.

3. DATA ANALYSIS

The critical discourse of the comments under study have been done based on the 'post-structuralist' view of Alan McKee related to analysis of texts. It states that "the analysis of a piece of text can be used to make educated guesses about the closest interpretations of the text within a given cultural context (McKee, 2003)." This view suggests that based on the cultural setting, texts can have a varied interpretation. It therefore focuses on "interpretations based on context that leave space for further discussions negating the idea of 'right or wrong' explanations (McKee, 2003)." The study made use of this notion to interpret and understand the selected comments, in order to gain insight into perceptions of the user base on the concepts of beauty and body shaming. For extended comprehension of the intended actions behind the text, 'speech acts' were coded based on Suzanne R. McMillen's speech act coding for comment analysis. "Speech acts can be defined as linguistic expressions that not only present relevant information, but also perform certain action (Britannica)." These were framed based on argumentation styles of the conversation, and other characteristics involved in civil discourse (McMillen, 2013).

The speech acts coded were as follows:

1. Trolling
2. Personal Attack
3. Supportive Comments
4. Respectful Disagreements
5. Unrelated Comments
6. Clarifications
7. Elaborations
8. Challenges or Objections

The following framework was further used to analyze and interpret the content.

▪ **Context of the article**	Body shaming and its related aspects as discussed by each article - including experiences of people, their fight against body shaming.
▪ **Excerpts from the discursive text under analysis**	User or Reader comments on these articles.
▪ **Interpretation and analysis of the text**	Analysis of perception of the users, societal conditioning revealed through the discursive texts, stand of the user with respect to the context.

4. RESULTS

The following table discusses in brief the results that were derived from the analysis of the 1034 comments. The comments by the users have been mentioned as it is, without changing the grammatical structures.

Articles	Significant Comments & Derivations
Article 1- Title: Was being 'Fat' the reason I didn't become the head girl? **Published:** 4th February 2017 **Author:** Suchetana Sinha	▪ The comments under the article gave an insight into the perception of the user base with regards to the act of body shaming in schools and its propagation in general. *"Body shaming/bullying does not previal only amongst students; it is deeply entrenched in the school system itself."* ▪ The words '*slim and zero figure*' are used as the apparent standards of beauty that prevail in the current society for the female gender.

Comments: 31	▪ User comments discuss the connection of patriarchy in contributing to the notions of beauty within the society. ▪ The concept of gender bias is being associated by certain comments with body shaming and the resultant injustice.
Article 2- Title: 6 Ridiculous ways Bollywood continues to glorify fair skin **Published:** 9th February 2017 **Author:** Saumya Anand **Comments:** 35	▪ The user comments revealed 2 sections of belief. One section retorted against the fair skin complex promoted in the Bollywood industry while the other believed that forms of entertainment and what they show should not be taken seriously. *"being desired is not linked with skin tone"* *"No one should be demeaned and dehumanized for something they were born into, something they cannot control."* *"Some things are pretty clear cut. Not a lot needs to be debated when the gay dude is almost always portrayed as effeminate, which somehow makes him less of a man. The question of that fine line of balance between expression and responsibility comes in when one talks about stuff which might unknowingly speak of things which must not be said."* ▪ The comment threads talked about the portrayal of unrealistic standards of beauty depicted in Bollywood. They were considered as a means of propagating unfair notions leading to biasness and mockery of people who failed to fit the standards. ▪ There were users who displayed clear aversion towards dark skin and vocalized their preference of fair skinned people. *"Ab jakie ki chitti kalai hai toh kya kare......ab kali kalaiyan*

	aacha thodi lagta hai" (so what else can be done if the actress has fair wrists. black wrists do not look good) *"Yup for me its a personal choice..I like fair and I am not ashamed to admit it.."*
Article 3- Title: Finally! A bra commercial that boldly smashes body image stereotypes **Published:** 17th February 2017 **Author:** Lipi Mehta **Comments:** 129	▪ Most of the user comments appreciated the initiative by the brand to display body positivity while others brushed it off as a marketing strategy. *"at least people's thinking about bodyshaming has changed... see the ad once"* *"I'm glad thick is normal now."* *"Brands pretend to care. Don't fall for it."* ▪ The comment section also involved users who engaged in direct fat and skinny shaming through their responses. *"Its women to be blamed for making the stereotype of women being skinny and shit like that... No man would prefer a woman who's skinny anyways... Nor do skinny women look normal... Women who have a bit of fat look actually beautiful... But a MINIMILISTIC FAT amount...* ���� *not the snowman bodied people... That's weird"* ▪ The analysis of comments under the article revealed a lack of acceptance of body diversity, ingrained notions about healthy bodies and instances of body shaming among males.
Article 4- Title: Yes, I am fat.	▪ The comments revealed a significant amount of user

Now, shut the fuck up and move on **Published:** 5th April 2017 **Author:** Jogitha Josey **Comments:** 752	experiences with regards to body shaming as personal experiences were revealed in response to the article. ▪ Certain sections of the users commented in appreciation of the authors courage to talk about her experience with body shaming and fighting against it. ▪ A separate section of the users resorted to victim blaming and claims that the author was promoting unhealthy lifestyle and unfit body goals by talking about being comfortable in one's own skin. *"I've been skinny ever since I was kid, and almost every day, random people come up to me and ask me to "eat something"* *"Ur fat they want u to become thin, u become thin they say ur skinny become bit fat, y do looks matter?"* *"If you're fat be prepared to be called fat as simple as that. You don't wanna be called fat start working out it will be good for you as well ◆◆ "* *"Just another loser who cant take criticism and can't get in shape... If you are fat, accept it! Why be sad when people tell you what you are? After all, health issues are not imaginary, you dreamy fools!"* *"Please avoid public transport then Otherwise I'll kick you for occupying extra space◆◆◆"* ▪ Majority of the user comments depicted extreme levels of body shaming and fat phobia.
Article 5- Title: An ode to my	▪ The user comments challenge the article as a glorification

extra pounds **Published:** 14th April 2017 **Author:** Barkha Manocha **Comments:** 5	of obesity based on misunderstood beliefs. - The comments reveal lack of awareness about causes of obesity and the concept of body shaming. - Aversion towards people who speak up about their experiences with body shaming is displayed within the user comments. *"What you are talking about is a seperate clinical entity they include anorexia, bulimia etc What I was talking about is obesity caused by over eating Obesity cause by other causes like metabolic disorders hormonal disorders etc should be treated medically and expert advice sought."* *"body proud warriors are promoting a dangerous narrative that obesity is good and everyone should be proud of their bodies as they stand thats stupid and moronic."* - The thread further included the perception of an ideal and fit body type which must be achieved by every individual. People outside of the perceived body image are described as people who need to change their appearance and get fit.
Article 6- Title: Next Time Someone Comments on Your Body, this is Why You Should Reply Back **Published:** 19th April 2016 **Author:** Binita Kakati	- The comments under the article involved extensive body shaming. - Lack of awareness about the negative effects of body shaming were displayed from the user comments. *'don't make fun of fat people. They have enough on their plates.'* Along with the dialogue, the meme also has the image of a lady holding a plate brimming with food.

Comments: 7	*"You're fat. Don't sugarcoat it cause you'll eat that too."* *"life is like a box of chocolate. It doesn't last as long for fat people."*
Article 7- Title: Making fun of dark skin is not a roast: Actor boldly slams comedy show for body shaming **Published:** 28ᵗʰ September 2016 **Author:** YKA staff **Comments:** 40	▪ The user comments revealed the use of humor as a medium of justifying body shaming. ▪ One section of the users spoke against the propagation of body shaming within comedy shows while others argued that humor should not be taken seriously. ▪ The gravity of the act of body shaming was scaled down with the pretext of harmless comedy. *"Get some sense of humor or die! You want roasts to be ethical? ��"* *"I remember the original roast where Ranveer and Arjun had appeared. In it there was so much of body shaming on all men and the only woman in the group. Everybody took it in good humour and forgot about it. May be her tolerance level was low."*
Article 8- Title: To those who body shamed her online, this girl had a confident response **Published:** 14ᵗʰ October 2016 **Author:** Suhani Chandhok	▪ The comments present below the article exhibited inherent victim blaming. ▪ Lack of understanding and empathy towards victims of body shaming were displayed within the comment section. *"if you wanna live peacefully, just keep the Instagram profile private. But yeah of course, its just too hard for the attention*

	seeking people.”
Comments: 35	

5. DISCUSSIONS

The careful analysis of the selected comments revealed inherent notions of beauty and fitness standards prevailing within the society. The comments further revealed the intensity with which the user base tried to disregard anyone who spoke of being victimized by body shaming. Clear instances of misuse of freedom of speech are laid bare. The study further revealed how users utilized the power of voicing out their opinions on online platforms from behind the screens, to propagate falsified notions inherited from the society they live in. The findings reiterate the significance of the research and the need to understand the concept of body shaming better in a culturally diverse country like India. The user statements and their choice of words reveal deep rooted perceptions on what physical features are considered beautiful on human beings, as well as how an individual should look in order to be considered beautiful. Apart from strongly held ideals, concrete instances of propagation of body shaming on the online platform were also revealed. This indicates how social media has become one of the major propagators of falsified beliefs on beauty as well as a medium of body shaming.

Keeping in view the post-structuralist view of Alan McKee on text and its analysis, it can be said that the opinions of the user base revealed through the study are a mirror of the ideals being propagated within the Indian society. The analysis further helped identified certain key themes related to the study. They are as follows:

Perceptions on standards of beauty: The study revealed a general aversion among people towards the darker skin tone. Fair skin tones were seen to be connected with idealized beauty standards. Glorified body proportions prevailing within the society were brought to light, where women are expected to be slim and fair, while men are supposed to be tall, muscular, and have a glorified amount of facial hair. It was observed that BMI (Body Mass Index) is being used as a means to justify the propagation of idealized body proportions. A narrow-minded perception towards what makes a human being beautiful was being displayed from time to time. The study further reveals a lack of understanding among the user base with regards to individual differences.

Perceptions on the concept of body shaming: It is observed that a certain section of the user base recognizes body shaming as a vice that needs to be addressed and prevented, while the other section considers the notion of body shaming as an excuse to justify unhealthy lifestyle. A significant amount of aversion was seen to be diverted towards individuals who are underweight or overweight. Lack of awareness regarding the mental, physical, social, and

emotional effects of body shaming on the victims as well as the perpetrators was found. The study revealed instances of rampant body shaming within the comment sections that were induced with a total disregard for the discussion that the article was trying to have. The use of humor as a means of commenting on people's bodies was observed as being an acceptable act to pursue. Furthermore, the impact of the standards propagated by the entertainment industry with regards to beauty were seen to be undermined by the community.

Attitude towards victims of body shaming: It was observed that there is a certain section of the user base that empathizes with the victims of body shaming. A significant number of personal experiences of body shaming were revealed inspired by those who spoke about it. Another section of the user base's comments revealed the presence of victim blaming prevalent within the society. Victims of body shaming were labelled as attention seekers during instances where they tried to open discussions about their experiences. The study reveals the prevalence of the belief within the community that what does not fit the standards of the society, must change itself to be accepted.

Perceptions on gender and body shaming: The study revealed insights about the perception of the female user base regarding the connection between patriarchy and notions of beauty. It was observed that many believed the current societal notions of beauty prevalent within the country to be a result of India's inherent patriarchal system. It noted from the study that females vocalized their experiences with body shaming more, while males tend to keep it to themselves. The study further revealed how certain section of the user base associated body appreciation to feminism. This in turn was connected to cultural erosion and westernization in India.

The above-mentioned findings reveal a significant amount of information about the standards of beauty within the Indian society. It also reveals the lack of awareness prevalent within India about the concept of body shaming, as well as its negative effects on the victims and perpetrators. The comments studied act as a mechanism to propagate these inherent belief systems that the users inherited from the teachings within the family and society. Their words act as a mirror of the notions prevailing within the society. The study therefore helps in answering the research questions put forth as the base of the research with regards to prevailing perceptions of beauty and notions of body shaming within the country.

6. LIMITATIONS & SUGGESTIONS

The major limitation of the study tends to be the fact that the comments were from a user base limited to the platform of Youth Ki Awaaz. Further studies can be conducted using users from other media platforms. The results can then be corroborated and expanded upon. Youth Ki Awaaz majorly has a user base that hails from the northern parts of India. Thus, further studies could be conducted based on region specific media platforms in order to understand the

prevalence of region-specific notions of beauty and body shaming. There are very few instances under analysis which reveal the extent of effects of body shaming on genders other than the female gender. Study needs to be conducted to understanding experiences of other genders with regards to body shaming and the society's expectations of them.

7. CONCLUSION

The purpose of the study was to act as a catalyst towards understanding the notions of body shaming and standards of beauty persisting within the Indian society. It was not an attempt to generalize the findings, but to add to the construct from the point of view of the Indian society, so as to act as a base for further studies. The review of literature as well as the study revealed a lack of research in India on body shaming and the resultant bias, victimization, abuse, and lack of inclusivity. It reports areas that need to be addressed in order to prevent the propagation of the vice of shaming and the need to create increasing awareness among the population, so as to ensure the existence of a fair society. The study also points towards the need of having a legal remedy within the country to tackle the issue of body shaming. The need to have responsive institutions within the country that addresses the issue and holds people accountable is highlighted. With the conclusion of the study, it is anticipated that the results and findings will be used for further exploration of the prevalence of body shaming in India as well as to spread awareness among the masses about the same.

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