

## Beyond the Gaze: A Qualitative Exploration of Young Women's Body Shaming Experiences

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### ABSTRACT

Young women's bodies are constantly subjected to public scrutiny, making body shaming a persistent cultural practice with significant psychological and social impact. The study explored the body-shaming experiences of three college-going women from Kerala, employing a narrative approach to examine how they construct meaning around these encounters. Semi-structured telephone interviews elicited detailed personal accounts, which were thematically analyzed. Three main themes emerged: (i) The vulnerable self, (ii) The reclaimed self, and (iii) Beyond the self. The findings align with the concepts of self-objectification, gender socialization, and narrative identity development, demonstrating how young women reauthor their personal lives in response to unpleasant, intrusive experiences. The study emphasizes that body shaming is not merely a personal insult, but a culturally rooted practice that demands collective dialogue and social change.

**Keywords:** *Body Shaming, Young Women, Narrative Approach, Self-Objectification*

**A**cross societies, a woman's identity is frequently reduced to her outward appearance or her body proportions. The notion of a woman as nothing but a body largely determines how she perceives and evaluates herself, how she is perceived by others, and thus impacts her life in innumerable ways. The way a woman perceives her body is different from how a man perceives his. She tends to evaluate and talk about her body as consisting of different, separate parts, e.g. 'I love my eyes, but I hate my arms'; whereas a man speaks of his body as a whole, functional entity, e.g. 'See how fast I can run' (Halliwell & Ditmar, 2003). Also, a woman tends to evaluate her body from an "external observational standpoint" more often than a man does (Calogero & Thompson, 2010). The culture and larger society to which she belongs have a role in creating body and appearance ideals (Bakhshi, 2011) and propagating them.

A woman's body, an important aspect of her identity, is the first thing that is noticed by others. How they react to her body and hence to her as an individual influences her self-esteem (Chrisler & Johnston-Robledo, 2018). When she is looked down on for her body and appearance, her self-worth gets hurt, and she begins to develop negative feelings about her body and "distressed apprehension of the self as inadequate and diminished" (Bartky, 1990). The feelings of body shame aggravate when her appearance is made salient, e.g. when she

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tries a new dress or stands in front of a mirror (Fredrickson et al., 1998); and the feelings became extreme when her body becomes the centre of attention. She starts to get anxious about her appearance and is constantly apprehensive about the normative evaluation and scrutiny of her body, which is not under her control (Calogero & Thompson, 2010). Her responses and consequent behaviors are influenced by the feminine beauty standards and schemas she has internalized throughout her life. She may actually “withdraw from life-engaging and life-sustaining activities such as meeting friends, exercising, going to work, dating, and meeting doctors” as she feels bad about her looks (Etcoff, Orbach, Scott, & D'Agostino, 2006). An excessive preoccupation with the appearance ideals and societal evaluation may lead to emotional difficulties such as depression, eating, and body dysmorphic disorders (American Psychiatric Association, 2000) and force her to take extreme measures such as surgical correction of her perceived flaws.

Attempts have been made by academics and researchers from varied fields of study to understand the development of body shame and its impact on women's lives. According to the Tripartite Model of Social Influence, socio-cultural sources such as family, peers, and media consistently promote striving towards appearance ideals, thereby leading to preoccupation with body image and, in turn, to body shame (Keery et al., 2004; Shroff & Thompson, 2006). These sources have been transmitting messages emphasizing the appearance and weight of their bodies (Grogan & Richards, 2002). Gender socialization (Eagly, Beall, & Sternberg, 2004) is also known to be a decisive factor. Women are socialized to focus more on their external appearance and their interpersonal qualities and relationships, and are taught to value being communal in line with the traditional gender role they are expected to perform.

As per the objectification theory (Frederikson & Roberts, 1997), women's bodies are always looked at and objectified, subtly enacted through the 'gaze'. Their body parts are often separately perceived and reduced to mere objects representing their wholeness (Bartky, 1990). Objectifying gaze, which is not under their control, occurs within interpersonal and social interactions, and in visual media depicting such encounters. The most profound effect of this objectification is that it forces women to adopt a peculiar view of self-objectification, an internalized observer's perspective of self, leading to form a self-consciousness characterized by frequent monitoring of the body's outward appearance. This self-objectification can lead to subjective experiences of shame, increased levels of appearance and safety anxiety, and reduced access to their own internal body sensations. These experiences may lead to various psychological difficulties like depression, eating disorders, and sexual dysfunction. The objectification theory has been used widely to understand women's experiences related to body image dissatisfaction and body shame (Rahmani, 2020; Szymanski, Moffitt & Carr, 2011).

Previous research has found that women's body image issues are significantly associated with the messages to be hyperfeminine in the traditional cultural contexts, which makes them hypervigilant about their appearance and increases the frequency of body monitoring (Brady et al., 2017). Women tend to internalize the negative messages about their bodies and deal with them through shame, dieting, anger, and overachievement. However, in some instances, the presence of multiple supportive systems helped them develop a body-positive identity (Salen, 2014).

Whether she is young or old, women may have to experience shame in one form or the other. And the stories they tell are unique, considering the varied socio-cultural factors.

Narratives are a great way to explore the different versions of her stories. The present study, using a narrative approach, attempts to understand how young women constructed meanings around their body, the messages they received about their body, and their reflections regarding them. The study is guided by the following research question: What are the personal and cultural narratives drawn upon by young women to construct meanings around their body-shaming experiences?

### **METHODOLOGY**

#### *Participants*

The study included three female college-going students, belonging to different districts of Kerala, and selected by means of snowball sampling. The inclusion criteria that had to be met to be a part of the study were: (i) having experienced body shaming and (ii) willingness to share their experiences.

All three participants were assigned pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality. Archana, a 20-year-old undergraduate student, believed her story needed to be told and heard. 21-year-old Swathy, a postgraduate student, was confused whether her experience qualified as significant; however, she chose to participate. A postgraduate student of 22 years, Nithya felt that articulating her experiences might help her make sense of them.

#### *Data collection*

The narrative data were collected through semi-structured interviews. Participants were informed about the purpose and nature of the study, and informed consent was obtained before data collection. Broad, open-ended questions were used to help the participants initiate their narrative accounts. The primary prompt used to initiate the conversation was: "I would like you to tell me about your experiences concerning body shaming and your responses to those". This approach was helpful for the participants to reflect on and structure the narratives in their own terms. As the interviews progressed, supplementary questions such as "Why do you think that is the case?" or "Could you explain by providing examples?" were used to elicit deeper insights, consistent with the narrative inquiry practices (Reissman, 2008). Each interview was of approximately 45-50 minutes and conducted over the telephone to accommodate the participants' convenience and locations. With the participants' consent, all interviews were audio-recorded to facilitate transcription and analysis.

#### *Narrative analysis*

The data collected was analyzed through narrative analysis, using a thematic approach. Narrative analytic methods are used for making sense of textual or visual data presented in the form of stories (Reissman, 2008). There are different approaches to narrative analysis based on the focus; the thematic version considers the content of the narratives, whereas the structural version looks into the structural elements. In the study, emphasis is on the content of the stories narrated, i.e., what the participants remember and reflect about their experiences. The thematic approach in narrative analysis is especially helpful in conceptualizing across several cases of interest, identifying common themes across participants and their narratives (Reissman, 2008). The data was transcribed verbatim and then coded to identify the major themes.

## RESULTS

The findings of the study are reported in the form of three descriptive narratives. In order to honour the confidentiality agreements with the participants, the identifying details have been altered.

### **“My body is mine”: Archana’s story**

Archana describes herself as “bulky” and recollects receiving comments about her body from a very young age. One hurtful incident occurred when her dance teacher commented, “Your body has toned down after you started dancing,” in front of other students. She felt exposed and embarrassed because of the public nature of the seemingly harmless comment. A flood of unsolicited remarks, such as “It will be better if you lose some weight” and “What happens when you grow up, if you are like this now?” began to pour in over time. She used to think, “My size is not creating problems for me, then why are they saying this?”

While growing up as an adolescent, she realized that there were things which were ‘socially acceptable’ and the societal expectations decided whether a person’s body and attractiveness were good or bad. She began to ignore the comments, and one would think that she did not bother about any of those. She appeared unaffected outwardly, but she felt the emotional weight of the comments often when she was alone with her thoughts. She resorted to dieting at one point, but had to drop it due to gastric issues. She used to get comments related to her eating portion size. She was a person who ate less, and her peers were surprised by seeing the ‘contrast’ between her small lunchbox and her body. Remarks extended beyond the body and weight, touching on her hair as well: “Your hair is so smooth that it will break easily”, “your hairline is receding”, and so on. She was trying her best not to be affected by those unsolicited judgments.

A significant shift occurred during her adolescent period, when she was introduced to social media. She came across a YouTube video of a woman of plus size, who embodied and promoted body positivity. That was transformative for her: “That woman is doing so well, she has her own brand. She had reached that level from a difficult position. So, I started to think, why can’t I?” She began to follow similar content and got exposed to many other women who were positive about their bodies. She began to love and appreciate her body more, admiring it by spending time in front of the mirror. She gained the courage to respond to others who were worried about her size and dressing style, saying, “My body is not your responsibility, it’s mine”. The support of her family aided her in this journey; her parents respected her choices and refrained from imposing restrictions.

Today, she feels that she is equipped to navigate such body-related comments. She feels that body shaming is a never-ending phenomenon, and many engage in that without thinking about the effect it has on others. She thinks that many girls suffer silently, conforming to the imposed standards, and this reality needs to be challenged.

### **“Unerasable memories”: Swathy’s story**

Swathy’s mother has facial hair, and so does she. “Oh, you have grown a moustache”- that was a comment she got from an older neighbour when she was studying in the first standard. Wherever she went, at least one person pointed out that. She became hesitant to go near people; when she was part of a group and when it was her turn to speak, she began to feel anxious that people would look at her face and comment. She was expecting that to happen all the time, and this continued throughout her school life. She would think, “If I make new

friends, will they judge my appearance and comment about that?" These apprehensions persisted for a long time.

One of the most distressing incidents happened at school, when a male classmate bluntly remarked in front of others, "You should have shaved your face and come, it looks really ugly". That incident was shocking to her and left her humiliated. Following this, she became more hesitant to sit in a group with her peers. She began withdrawing from others and would take a detour to avoid encountering that particular boy. It became difficult for her to be or talk in front of people, as she felt herself inferior to them. She used to share these experiences with her mother and cry over them. Her mother, having faced similar situations, would console her by saying, "I have lived like this all my life. Ignore their comments and move on".

After completing her twelfth grade, she actively searched for ways to address the facial hair issue, since it began to affect her confidence. She began to read more about and build her awareness of body shaming and body positivity. She came to realize that the fault is with them, not her. With the help of hair removal methods such as using pluckers or waxing and newly gained knowledge, she became much more confident. Her anxiety about speaking in a group or to strangers had come down. She left her place for a different state to do an undergraduate degree course and made new friends.

But the emotional scars remain. The painful memories are triggered and re-lived whenever she encounters people from her past, such as the neighbour or the classmate who commented on her appearance. She observes that overt comments have become less frequent, which may be due to increased awareness. She says that even if somebody comments at all, she will be able to respond by saying that "My body is my choice". But she cannot do away with the hair removal methods as she doesn't "want to hear those kinds of comments again. I may respond to the comments, but the pain will be there. So, this is better".

Swathy points out an important aspect of her experience, "Fat shaming and skinny shaming are the normalized types. Those who face these open up and share about their experiences. But people are hesitant to share experiences like mine, which are not considered in the mainstream of body shaming. People are not realizing the other dimensions of body shaming". Her story underscores the need to broaden the discourse around body shaming to include overlooked experiences like hers.

### **"When my femininity is questioned": Nithya's story**

Most people would consider Nithya as a girl who would get tick marks on almost all the boxes of the set standards of beauty and appearance. However, her lean body was a problem for many. From puberty onwards, she began to receive frequent messages from her family and relatives, "You are thin, you are not eating well". She would eat well, but it would not reflect on her body, something she attributes to "metabolism issues". Mealtime at relatives' places became distressing, with remarks such as "You are a girl, you should be healthy, otherwise it will be difficult to get married". These comments were painful for her as they questioned her desirability and femininity.

Issues related to femininity aspects came up frequently, especially about her dressing style. She often wore jeans and shirts, mostly which did not align with the traditional expectations of feminine attire. She had to go through "many gazes and hundreds of filters of many eyes", leading to anxiety while talking to strangers. She would "shake when meeting new people".

## Beyond the Gaze: A Qualitative Exploration of Young Women's Body Shaming Experiences

She had a visible moustache, about which her classmates teased her. It didn't affect her much at that time, but it had contributed to feelings of insecurity later. She would hesitate to pose for a photo because her "lean body doesn't look good in the photo". She would hesitate to smile because her "teeth are not good, and eyes are small". She would avoid going to family gatherings and relatives' places to avoid hearing the comments about her body. She would wear "baggy or loose" clothing to disguise her lean body. Later, this adaptive strategy became her dressing style.

Her emotional reactions to the remarks are "mood-dependent"; she notes that "a whole day is ruined" if she hears a comment when she is in a bad mood. She feels that her body is weak and not very healthy as it should be; she has issues with back pain and feels tired easily. These further add to the inadequacy feelings related to her body.

She feels that people are often the victims of cultural conditioning; "They have been brought up like that. They are not considering my intentions to do things. I cut my hair because I like it, but people ask me whether I want to be a boy. I wear jeans and shirts because I am comfortable in that". She offers a counter-narrative too, she asserts: "I am not feminine at all. But I am not feeling incomplete". She doesn't particularly like the "labeling of people as having feminine and masculine qualities". She questions the rigidity of social categories; "Why can't humans be seen as humans?" Her narrative invites a broader, inclusive understanding of individual identity, one that embraces personal authenticity as opposed to established norms and labels.

### **Themes across the narratives**

The stories by Archana, Swathi, and Nithya presented the complex nature of body-shaming experiences. The analysis revealed themes related to the emotional burden of these experiences, the strategies they adopted to navigate them, and broader reflections on collective change. Three main themes emerged: (i) The vulnerable self; (ii) The reclaimed self; and (iii) Beyond the self.

### ***Theme 1: The Vulnerable Self***

This theme reflects the participants' experiences of being seen as 'lacking' through the comments and evaluations of others. The 'vulnerable' self speaks not only about the constant scrutiny they had to face, but also the emotional wounds produced by the repetitive negative interactions.

For Archana, vulnerability was shaped by comments made in public, such as when her dance teacher had remarked that her body had "toned down" in front of her peers. Even though she appeared unaffected outwardly, she recalled how such remarks lingered. Likewise, Swathi described her school years as a period characterized by constant worry, fearing when the next comment about her facial hair would happen, and whether the new friends she made would judge her appearance. For Nithya, this was tied to questions related to her femininity, like "you are a girl, you should be healthy, otherwise it will be difficult to get married". These exchanges undermined her sense of worth and labelled her body as inadequate in meeting societal norms.

Altogether, these narratives illustrate how body shaming destabilizes the self by making the young women feel exposed, insecure, and inferior.

***Theme 2: The Reclaimed Self***

This theme captures how the participants reclaimed themselves and their bodies by exerting agency. The 'reclaimed self' is characterized by their conscious attempts to establish boundaries, redefine beauty, and assert ownership over their own bodies.

Archana narrated a clear turning point, where she encountered body positivity influencers in the virtual world: "that woman is doing so well,... So why can't I?" From then on, she actively began to affirm her body and to push back against intrusive comments; "my body is not your responsibility, it's mine". For Swathy, reclaiming her 'self' was gradual, which often co-existed with her vulnerability. She began using hair removal methods in an attempt to protect herself from further humiliation and to regain confidence in social situations. Her journey of reclaiming herself is ongoing, and it is not an easy one. Nithya could be seen drawing strength from framing her choices as authentic self-expression; "I cut my hair because I like it...I wear jeans and shirt because it is comfortable". She exerted her agency by challenging the existing gender labels and extending her identity beyond the binary.

Thus, the narratives give a glimpse of how the participants negotiated agency within the constraints and their attempts at redefining and revaluing themselves.

***Theme 3: Beyond the Self***

In addition to voicing their personal pain, the participants also reflected on the broader cultural dimensions of the exchanges. This theme, 'beyond the self' reflects the participants' awareness that body shaming is a culturally embedded phenomenon requiring collective efforts to rewrite.

Archana connected her journey to bigger concerns, mentioning that body shaming is a "never-ending phenomenon". She opined that many young girls suffer quietly due to imposed societal standards, and this reality needs to be challenged. Swathy emphasized the unacknowledged forms of body shaming, stressing the need to have broader discourses around different forms. Nithya pointed out the cultural conditioning that equates gender roles with appearance; as she questioned, "why can't humans be seen as humans?"

These reflections show the participants' critical awareness that body shaming is not only an individual issue but also something that is tied to age-old societal norms and cultural practices. By positioning their stories within a collective discourse, the participants look forward to a shift in perspective at the larger community level.

**DISCUSSION**

The study aimed to explore the body-shaming narratives of three young women from diverse backgrounds. A narrative approach was adopted to gain insights into how individual women uniquely navigate their experiences in the context of cultural expectations, femininity, and gender stereotypes. The study emphasizes the value of personal storytelling in revealing the complexities of body shaming and its implications in young women's lives.

Each narrative reflected a distinct style shaped by the participants' personal histories and socio-cultural environments. Archana's account represented a testimonial, showing support with other women going through body-image judgments. She was enthusiastic about the body positivity activism as represented in popular media. Swathy's narrative had a deeply emotional tone, characterized by vivid recollections of painful incidents. She occasionally seemed uncertain about how her coping strategies, such as using hair removal methods while

## Beyond the Gaze: A Qualitative Exploration of Young Women's Body Shaming Experiences

advocating for self-acceptance, might be perceived. Nithya's storytelling was reflective, marked by a critical stance towards cultural notions. She actively questioned the societal frameworks that had contributed to her experiences.

The stories illustrate how women's bodies are regularly evaluated and commented upon. These accounts echo Fredrickson and Roberts' (1997) objectification theory, which posits that women are taught to internalize the external gaze and to assess their self-worth based on cultural ideas of outward appearance and attractiveness. The process of self-objectification was rampant in participants' lives, as indicated by the way they recalled remarks about weight, facial hair, or weight as ongoing experiences that shaped their self-esteem and identity.

The personal context of the participants plays out differently in shaping each of their journeys. Archana's parents were all supportive, helping her navigate through the difficult experiences. They were protective of her in every way, which might have influenced her easy transition from a doubtful teen to a body-positive young woman. Swathy's mother, who had to face similar challenges, makes use of her life's example as a way to console her daughter. Here, the emphasis is more on accepting that there is a 'flaw' and 'move on' rather than questioning the societal standards. Nithya's mother, however, tends to stand with the majority and puts extra pressure on Nithya, which forces her to question the age-old notions. This indicates that parental influence, especially from the mothers' side, can be a significant factor influencing how young women cope with the effects of body shaming experiences (Brady, 2016).

However, the narratives also show that participants' identity is not shaped passively by cultural elements; rather, it is negotiated over time. From a narrative identity perspective (McAdams, 2001), the accounts depict how the young women have been trying to make sense of their unpleasant experiences and integrate them into their sense of self. Archana embracing body positivity movements is an exemplar of a 'redemptive sequence', where adversity fuels individual growth. Swathy presents an ongoing fight, a negotiation arc where self-protection attempts coexist with vulnerability. Nithya holds her story as a form of counter-narrative, actively challenging the age-old notions of femininity and attractiveness.

The participants' accounts also give insights regarding the socio-political dimensions of body shaming. The stories show how cultural socialization links outward appearance to femininity or marriageability, which reinforces patrilineal power structures. Thus, the personal distress associated with body shaming experiences cannot be separated from the systemic elements that continuously control how women see their bodies.

Overall, participants' narratives suggest the presence of a dual burden. Body shaming experiences have a severe psychological impact in the form of feelings of inadequacy, self-objectification, and emotional vulnerability, while also pushing them to negotiate their identity, reclaim agency, and rewrite their life scripts. Thus, these young women's stories remind us that body shaming is something beyond the personal, a culturally rooted practice that sustains gendered power relations. The study highlights the need for more supportive spaces in families, peer groups, and the community, as well as focused social interventions to challenge existing beauty ideals. Future research can explore the experiences of women belonging to different age groups and backgrounds, and examine the long-term impact of body shaming on identity.

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***Conflict of Interest***

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