

## A Study of Sexual Shaming on Body Consciousness, Self Esteem and Relationship Adjustment among Young Adults: A Review Study

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### ABSTRACT

Sexual shaming is a socially constructed and judging, stigmatizing or morally condemning individual behaviour, expression, or appearance because of assumed or actual sexual behaviour of that person. Based on the patriarchal norm and sexual double standards, sexual shaming is a form of social regulation that has been disproportionately applied to women and gender minorities. Such social judgments are likely to be internalized resulting in sexual shame that has been associated with a number of adverse psychological consequences. The current review discusses the psychological effects of sexual shaming among young adults, with a special emphasis on the relationship between the said element and body consciousness, self-esteem, and relationship adjustment. This paper will use theoretical approaches, including the objectification theory, shame theory, and developmental psychology, to understand how sexual shaming experiences can lead to increased body surveillance, negative perceptions of the body, low self-esteem, and problems in building and sustaining healthy romantic relationships. The particular stage of development during which young adulthood takes place is the critical phase in which identity is formed, sexuality is explored and intimate relationships established, so individuals are especially subject to the impacts of social evaluation and stigma. Moreover, the growth of social media has contributed to the amplification of the scrutiny of sexuality and its permanence, which further increases the psychological effects of sexual shaming in modern society. Although the topic of sexual shaming is increasingly gaining attention as an important psychosocial problem, few studies have investigated how it impacts a variety of psychological and relationship effects at the same time. The purpose of this review is therefore to integrate current literature in order to obtain a broad view of the impact of sexual shaming on intrapersonal and interpersonal functioning in young adults. Combining the available empirical and theoretical literature, the paper reveals the necessity on the multidimensional study of the interaction between sexual stigma, psychological well-being, and relational adjustment in the modern sociocultural background.

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Sexual shaming refers to the practice of evaluating, embarrassing, stigmatising or moralising people who have, or are believed to have, participated in a sexual activity, sexual expression, appearance or not-conformity to culturally established sexual standards. It is a form of social control that is patriarchal whereby its foundation is the sexual dual standards and moral values in which the acceptable forms of sexuality are governed by (Tolman, 2002). In the majority of instances, sexual shaming is carried out via slut-shaming, victim-blaming, derogatory labeling, character assassination and social sidelining, however, it is not only interpersonal aggression, but a significantly bigger system of gendered social control (Ringrose & Renold, 2012). Although both genders can be sexually judged, the findings of empirical studies have indicated that women and gender minorities are not fairly judged and criticized when they engage in the same act more significantly (Fredrickson and Roberts, 1997; Kreager and Staff, 2009). Sexual shaming is inherent in the design of sexual double standards in which the same sexual behaviours are rated differently in terms of gender (Crawford and Popp, 2003). The sexuality of women under such circumstances is usually constructed so that it will be regulated, monitored and evaluated and so the principles of modesty, purity and respectability enhanced. These social cultural standards contribute internalized sexual shame that can be summed in the internalisation of negative beliefs to sexual self (Gilbert, 2002). The internalised shame has also been discovered to be associated with many adverse psychological effects that encompass anxiety, depressive symptoms, loss of self-worth and poor interpersonal functioning (Tangney and Dearing, 2002). The period of young adulthood is a highly delicate phase in the developmental process and internalisation of sexual shaming. According to the psychosocial theory, the young adulthood on the other hand according to Erik Erikson is the crisis of intimacy versus isolation wherein individuals seek to create meaningful and reciprocate relationships and develop their identity (Erikson, 1968). It is a developmental stage that is marked by enlarged body consciousness, sexual identity experimentation and commitment that grows very intensely to romantic relationships. Simultaneously, young adults are more sensitive to peer evaluation and social comparison in a digitally mediated scenario (Vogel et al., 2014). Consequently, sexual shaming may have long-term psychological consequences with far-reaching effects at this stage. One of the spheres that has been affected by sexual shaming is body consciousness. The theory of objectification suggests that, in a society where objects (and women bodies in particular) are subjected to unceasing scrutiny, there is a possibility that people may come to view themselves as being looked at by someone and this creates the experience of self-objectification and the necessity of observing their body at all times (Fredrickson and Roberts, 1997). Sexual shaming enhances this process and it identifies moral valuation with bodily appearance and sexual exhibition. Body dissatisfaction, anxiety over appearance and the bad psychological state has been associated with increased body awareness (Moradi and Huang, 2008). One of the reasons of such a vicious circle can be sexual shaming whereby individuals develop a high level of concern with their bodies as the focal point of moral and social reproach. Self-esteem is the other significant psychological variable, which is influenced by sexual shaming. Self-esteem is the term used to explain how an individual in the global society perceives himself in terms of his value and capacity (Rosenberg, 1965). Feelings of guilt, built-up insufficiency and defectiveness may be experienced, as a result of the repetition of moralizing or sexualizing. Their identity is also feeble and reliant on social

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validation as soon as individuals begin to measure their own intrinsic value in relation to extrinsic moral approval. The researches reveal a correlation of low self-esteem with shame-proneness and high with emotional distress and maladaptive coping behaviours (Tangney and Dearing, 2002). Therefore, sexual shaming has the potential of destroying psychological resources of resilience and adaptive functioning. Besides the intrapersonal effects, sexual shaming has relational functioning effects. Relationship adjustment entails contentment, quality of communication, trust, emotional closeness and dispute management of romantic unions (Spanier, 1976). The sexual shame internalised can discourage the open discussion of boundaries, desires, and expectations, which do not support the transparency in the relationships and emotional intimacy. The possibility of judgment and rejection can provoke avoidant behaviour, withdrawal of emotions or inability to make claims in intimate relationships. This empirical evidence shows that shame is linked to less relationship satisfaction, dysfunctional communication, and relational distress (Leary, 2007). Consequently, sexual shaming may not only lead to personal psychological effect but even interpersonal relationship and harmony. The sexual interrogation has become more pronounced and everlasting in the contemporary society as a result of the proliferation of social media platforms. Pictures, speculations and moral judgment are also spread intensively through online spaces and this enhances the vigilance of the people and peer judgements (Ringrose & Renold, 2012). Cyber harassment and slut-shaming via the Internet have become typical psychosocial stressors among young adults that enhance dissatisfaction with the body image, anxiety, and feelings of insecurity in relationships (Vogel et al., 2014). In spite of the tendency to acknowledge sexual shaming as a socially created phenomenon, there is a lack of research that empirically addresses the simultaneous impacts of the given phenomenon on body consciousness, self-esteem, and adjustment to relationships on a single scale. As young adulthood is the period of developmental salience and shame is a multidimensional phenomenon, there is an urgent need to investigate sexual shaming as the multidimensional psychosocial phenomenon and identify its influence on the intrapersonal and interpersonal domains. In this way, the present study will aim at taking into account psychological impact of sexual shaming in the realms of body consciousness and self-esteem, relationship adaptation in young adults. The proposed work is directed to a contribution to a nuanced comprehension of the ways in which sexual shaming determines psychological well-being and functioning of connections in contemporary sociocultural contexts through merging theoretical perspectives on the objectification theory, shame theory, and developmental psychology.

**The literature suggests a cascade theoretical pathway:** Sexual Shaming- Internalised Shame- Less Self-esteem- more Body Surveillance- Relationship Disruption. However, most of the empirical evidence is in the Western context. The collectivistic orientation, honor-based moral systems, and rapid digitalisation of the Indian socio-cultural background can alter the nature of these linkages or their direction. Moreover, practical findings cannot always be in line with theoretical constructs that predict high levels of negative performance. Indian young adults high and low levels of sexual shaming have rarely been compared by formal statistical techniques in Indian young adult samples. Thus, the current study will objectively examine the issue of whether sexual shaming in India is significantly related to body consciousness, self-esteem, and relationship adjustments in the appearance of young adults.

The following are a few studies that examine the relationship between sexual shaming and psychological well-being.

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### **SEXUAL SHAME**

The psychological effect of sexual shaming on young adults is the topic of my study in this literature review. Shame is usually referred to as the intense negative feelings which are marked by the feeling of the devaluation of self in the world. According to (Tangney and Dearing, 2002), the emotion of shame is vehement negative and the sense of being eviscerated in relation to the world is experienced. Sexual shaming is stigmatization of a person founded on his/her appearance, sexual availability and actual or presumed sexual behaviour. It may occur in either physical or in virtual environment. It is mainly targeted towards women. Dr. Rebekah Shallcross of The Feminist Therapy Centre writes that sexual shaming is characterized as the stigmatisation of a person due to his/her looks, his/her availability to sex and his/her real or imagined sexual behaviour as being in the dominant culture the pillars of femininity and this is the main reason sexual shaming is directed towards women and girls. It is an expression that women will not get to be their complete selves, including their sexual selves. Sexual shaming compels people to take the observer viewpoint of their bodies. The psychological well-being will be impacted. Studies have revealed that slut-shaming can severely affect the mental health and well-being of women, since it is the process of taxing and demeaning women because of how they dress or perceived to be behaving sexually. Contextually, regarding Instagram, where females tend to share pictures of themselves and their bodies, slut-shaming can be reported through derogatory remarks, Internet bullying, and even cyberbullying. This may result in shame, anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem and this may affect mental health of women in the long term. Moreover, women who go through slut-shaming are also at a risk of being more inclined to risky sexual behaviour or even form unhealthy relationships because of it. (Das, 2025). Most importantly, (Goblet and Glowacz, 2021) note that such shaming is not only confined to the internal psyche but it also spreads to the social functioning of the individual as he is being belittled sexually, such actions result in behavioural inhibition, which is a defensive psychological stance, marked by withdrawal. Although this withdrawal is aimed at reducing the additional rejection of peers, it actually puts the individual at a greater risk.

### **SEXUAL SHAME AND SELF ESTEEM**

When the world assessment of the self (Self-Esteem) turns negative, then the person starts obsessively checking on the main cause of the shame which is the physical body. Nevertheless, the slut-shaming insults and social rejection (Goblet and Glowacz, 2021) interfere with this requirement as they place a spoiled identity on the target. External social stigmas are then applied as internal personality factors through the procedure of negative self-assessment and upward social comparison (Reilly, Rochlen, and Awad, 2014). The result of this internalization is a lack of self-efficacy that makes the person ill-prepared to cope with the daily stressors and exposes them to more risks of depression and dysfunctional coping strategies (Steiger et al., 2014; Branden, 1994). Finally, sexual shame also can be considered as one of the main antagonists of the belief of worthiness, essentially distorting the psychological path of the individual.

### **SEXUAL SHAME AND CONSCIOUSNESS**

Repeated exposure to sexual criticism, according to the Objectification Theory (Fredrickson and Roberts, 1997) acts as a catalyst making external social evaluation into a long term and habitual manner of body monitoring. Sexual Shaming is vital in having a direct effect on the body consciousness of an individual by ensuring that the body becomes the focal point of social assessment and criticism and ensure a person is always conscious of how their bodies are perceived and judged by others. Studies have associated self-objectification with

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psychological health consequences that include depression, anxiety and lack of productivity. Hence, the indirect cause of mental health issues of women is the sexual objectification of women since it causes self-objectification (Augustus-Horvath and Tylka, 2009; Fredrickson and Roberts, 1997; Harned, 2000; Szymanski and Henning, 2007). Under these circumstances whereby young adults feel that their sexual reputation is beyond their control because of shaming they will resort to their physical frame to exercise a sense of control. This is the psychological connection with disordered eating and body dysmorphia (Szymanski and Henning, 2007). When people are subjected to recurrent sexual disparagement, they tend to develop body checking reactionary to body extremes including looking in the mirror, experiencing discontent or discomfort with their bodies (Burnette et al., 2019).

### **SEXUAL SHAME AND RELATIONSHIPS**

Sexual shame has interpersonal effects in the form of a severe impairment of intimacy and sexual functioning. The young adults with high degree of sexual shaming tend to have problems with emotional intimacy, being vulnerable and open sexual communication. They experience shame, create fear of being judged negatively by an intimate partner (Montesi et al., 2020). The influence of the key partners, peers and even acquaintances are great in adolescence and young adulthood therefore negative mirroring may result in formation of negative self-identity, which will directly reduce attention to stimuli, thus, interfering with sexual desire (Pines, 1984). Negative and self-blaming beliefs regarding ones sexual self, especially the incompetence, can directly reduce the attention to the stimuli, thus, disrupting sexual desire. Women with increased sexual shame have more negatively balanced sexual self-schemas, which, consequently, results in sexual desire, arousal, sexual satisfaction, and romantic attachment. Sexual shame and sexual functioning tend to be reciprocal, which illustrates that sexual shame is a likely causal and perpetuating factor in the causes of sexual problems in women (Camilla Graziani and Meredith L. Chivers, 2024). The embarrassment becomes a third party in a relationship, which inhibits the safe bond and presence that lays the foundation of the healthy relationship development. In conclusion, Cascading is proposed in the literature Sexual Shaming is a weapon of social control and loss of self-esteem by having all people of the world view you as worthless, Hyper-vigilant Body Consciousness activated by Self-objectification, and Relationship Health sabotage caused by cognitive interference and the fear of being vulnerable. This cycle underscores the fact that sexual shame is not a temporary feeling but a structural psychological burden that defines the identity and interpersonal path of young adults.

### **CONCLUSION**

Sexual shaming is a pervasive socio-cultural phenomenon that operates as a mechanism of regulating sexuality through moral judgment, stigma, and social control. Rooted in patriarchal norms and reinforced through sexual double standards, it disproportionately targets women and gender minorities, shaping how individuals perceive and evaluate their bodies, identities, and relationships. The literature reviewed in this paper highlights that repeated exposure to sexual judgment and stigmatization can lead to the internalization of sexual shame, which in turn contributes to several adverse psychological outcomes.

One of the key impacts of sexual shaming is its influence on body consciousness. Through processes explained by objectification theory, individuals may begin to view their bodies from an external evaluative perspective, leading to heightened body surveillance, appearance anxiety, and body dissatisfaction. In addition to body-related concerns, sexual shaming can

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significantly undermine self-esteem by promoting feelings of guilt, inadequacy, and reduced self-worth. When individuals internalize societal judgments about sexuality, their sense of personal value may become contingent upon adherence to socially constructed norms, thereby weakening psychological resilience and overall well-being. Furthermore, the effects of sexual shaming extend beyond intrapersonal functioning and influence interpersonal relationships. Internalized shame can inhibit open communication, emotional intimacy, and trust within romantic relationships, thereby affecting relationship satisfaction and adjustment. Individuals who fear moral judgment or rejection may avoid expressing their needs, desires, or boundaries, which can contribute to relational insecurity and emotional withdrawal. In contemporary society, the impact of sexual shaming has been further intensified by the rise of digital media environments, where online platforms facilitate rapid dissemination of judgments, images, and reputational attacks.

Overall, the study indicates that sexual shaming has multidimensional effects on psychological and relational functioning. However, existing research often examines these outcomes in isolation. Therefore, there is a need for more comprehensive and integrative studies that simultaneously examine the influence of sexual shaming on body consciousness, self-esteem, and relationship adjustment. Understanding these interconnected effects can contribute to greater awareness of the psychological harm caused by sexual stigma and support the development of interventions aimed at promoting healthier attitudes toward sexuality, body image, and interpersonal relationships among young adults.

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