

NAVIGATING BODY SHAMING: CHALLENGES AND LESSONS FROM THE EXPERIENCES OF FEMALE UNIVERSITY UNDERGRADUATES IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

Body shaming is a widespread problem with serious repercussions, and this study investigated its impact on female undergraduates at Obafemi Awolowo University (OAU) in Nigeria. Using a qualitative, descriptive case study design, researchers conducted semi-structured interviews with 12 undergraduates to explore the forms of body shaming they experienced, the contexts in which it occurred, and its effects on their well-being. Thematic analysis of their lived experiences revealed that body shaming instances, perpetrated by people in various contexts, significantly impacted different dimensions of the students' well-being. In response, participants developed several coping strategies, including practicing self-love and acceptance, seeking support, trivializing mockery, and engaging in education and sensitization efforts. These informal, experiential, and transformative learning processes helped them build personal agency and adaptive skills. The study concludes that unmanaged body shaming can have long-term effects, emphasizing the need for intensified support groups and awareness campaigns to help students combat and cope with this issue.

Keywords: body shaming, wellbeing, undergraduates, learning, lived experiences

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Introduction

Globally, individuals have been and continue to be subjected to judgmental, negative comments or remarks about their physical appearance or features in both public and private spheres (Czernecka, 2019; Marshall-Lee, Reddy, & Frain, 2024; Schluger, 2025). The emotions that follow after a person is body shamed are often deep yet hidden, unpleasant, and sometimes life-threatening. Body shaming is an act where someone directs negative, unwanted opinions or remarks toward a person's body without necessarily meaning to cause harm, but which is nonetheless interpreted negatively by the target. Furthermore, body shaming can occur online as well as offline, and it can take many forms, from well-intentioned advice to malicious insults (Schlüter et al., 2023). While body shaming cuts across gender, race, religion, and other parameters, one of the groups most affected by the phenomenon is youth (Deviantony, Fitria, Rondhianto & Pramesuari, 2024).

Additionally, providing a compendium of global body image statistics for female children and teenagers based on various studies, Linardon (2024) reported that around 50% of 13-year-old American girls were unhappy with their bodies, a figure that rose to nearly 80% by age 17. Similarly, nearly 80% of teenage girls fear becoming fat,

while body image is among the top four concerns for young women. In Nigeria, young females are especially vulnerable to body shaming due to socio-cultural and media-influenced beauty standards, with tertiary institutions being a major setting where many are often affected (Ibodhe, 2024; Ogunseyi, Mutua, & Chen, 2025; Okoli, Moneke, Onuchukwu, & Obi, 2023).

There is a growing concern about body shaming among female undergraduates. Okoli, Moneke, Onuchukwu and Obi (2023) reported that females were more exposed to body shaming than males, with social media playing a major role. Combining this with academic demands poses peculiar difficulties for them. Despite growing awareness, the lived experiences of body-shamed Nigerian female undergraduates—specifically the impacts on self-perception, mental health, and social interactions—remain sparsely explored in qualitative research. It is equally essential to impress the need for the creation of support networks and interventions that effectively lessen the adverse effects of body shaming, especially in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). This study therefore aims to: identify the forms of body shaming experienced by female undergraduates in Obafemi Awolowo University (OAU) and the contexts in which they occur; explore the impact of body shaming on the well-being of female undergraduates in the study area; and examine the lessons female undergraduates learned to cope with body shaming experiences in Obafemi Awolowo University. The following research questions guided this study: What are the forms of body shaming experienced by female undergraduates in OAU and where do they occur? What is the impact of body shaming on the well-being of female undergraduates? What lessons have those who have been body shamed learned to cope with their experience in OAU?

Literature Review

Forms of Body Shaming and Their Impact on Well-being in Higher Education Institutions

The existing literature is rich with studies on the various forms of body shaming prevalent in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and their impact on young people's well-being. Across different contexts and settings, scholars consistently identify weight-related body shaming as a particularly widespread form. For example, in a study at a Malaysian university, Zulkifli, Lati, and Idris (2023) found that body weight and size were the most prevalent concerns among undergraduates. From an Italian perspective, Cerolini et al. (2024) reported that body shaming and weight stigma from peers and family members were common among adolescents, with a higher incidence of eating disorder symptoms, body dissatisfaction, and weight bias among females. Saxena, Mathur, and Jain (2020) highlighted that while women are often shamed for being either too fat or too thin, men are typically targeted for their muscularity and body structure.

In a study by Mustafa et al. (2022), the most frequently identified form of body shaming was name-calling related to body shape, followed by negative comments about weight and/or height, and remarks about skin complexion. Similarly, Okoli et al. (2023) found that among female undergraduates at a Nigerian university, the most prevalent forms of body shaming were related to facial appearance or complexion, with social media playing a critical role in its spread. Chen and Todd (2005), as cited in Okoli et al. (2023), further highlighted that aside from fat-shaming, other forms of shaming can include

targeting height, hairiness, hair color, body shape, looks, tattoos, piercings, or physical marks from diseases. Regardless of the specific form, body shaming has an impact, which can be more profound for some victims than for others.

Previous studies (Birkeland & von Ranson, 2024; Opesemowo & Taiwo, 2025) have shown that body shaming can lead to both short- and long-term consequences. Cerolini et al. (2024), Saxena et al. (2020), and Zulkifli et al. (2023) all noted that body shaming can contribute to negative body image and dissatisfaction, which can lead to low self-esteem, eating disorders, emotional distress, and other mental health issues. These consequences can pose risks to a young person's overall well-being and adversely affect their academic performance. Mustafa et al. (2022) also reported that the impacts of body shaming include depression, which can lead to suicidal ideation, anxiety, and body dysmorphia. Given these established consequences, it's equally important to understand the specific spaces and contexts where body shaming occurs for young adults.

Spaces and Contexts Where Body Shaming Occurs for Young Adults

Body shaming happens in various spaces, including social media, peer groups, and other social settings. Social media, which includes platforms like Facebook, Instagram, X (formerly Twitter), and YouTube, serves as a network of online venues that promote user-generated content and wield significant cultural influence on everything from fashion to health trends (Ashar, 2024). Hiding behind the cloak of anonymity or a pseudonym, users can harm or abuse others online through cyberbullying and cyber abuse (Australian Government, eSafety Commissioner, n.d.). Lin et al. (2024) affirm that social media platforms are a high-risk environment for spreading negative body images, which can lead to body shaming. The prominence of social media as a tool for body shaming among young adults is alarming. Mondol (2024) found that 66.45% of students had experienced body shaming, and 42.76% of these cases occurred online. Similarly, Zulkifli et al. (2023) reported that over half of Malaysian university students struggled with body image, influenced by social stigma and idealized beauty standards on social media. Okoli et al. (2023) showed that 70% of undergraduates had been body-shamed on social media. These findings highlight the normalization of body shaming in virtual spaces and identify social media as a key enabler.

Peer and Social Interactions

Beyond the virtual world, adolescents and young adults are confronted by body-related stereotypes in physical spaces like schools and universities, where they interact with peers, colleagues, and lecturers during academic and extracurricular activities. Body shaming also occurs in private settings such as social circles, friendship networks, romantic relationships, sports teams, student hostels, cultural or religious gatherings, and within the family. Deviantony et al. (2024) assert that body shaming among young adults is deeply rooted in societal norms and peer interactions, also noting the family and media as prominent sources. Kenny et al. (2017) showed that adolescents face strong peer pressure to conform to appearance expectations, and deviations from these norms can lead to negative experiences.

Nnamchi et al. (2024) affirmed that constant interaction with peers in HEIs contributes to undergraduates' dissatisfaction with their bodies. Gam et al. (2020, cited in Zulkifli et al., 2023) reported that students with a physical appearance that differs from the

majority are often shamed and neglected by others. Additionally, Ifitania (2021, as cited in Zulkifli et al., 2023) recognized that body shaming is also perpetrated by close community members, including family, friends, and teachers. Within athletic contexts, a University of Toronto study on retired female Canadian national athletes and Olympians reported that all participants had experienced body-related emotional abuse, such as negative verbal comments, body monitoring, forced food and water restrictions, public criticism, and punishment for not meeting body-related standards imposed by their coaches. These experiences resulted in long-term detrimental effects (Damjanovic, 2021). Having examined the settings where body shaming occurs, it is important to explore how young adults learn to cope with these experiences.

Young Adults' Learning to Cope with Body Shaming Experiences

Body shaming experiences can be a significant source of stress for young adults due to their detrimental consequences (Deviantony et al., 2024; Kudlová, et al., 2024). It is therefore unsurprising that those who are shamed devise ways to cope with the experience. Coping, which involves acquiring, adapting, and applying knowledge and skills to handle a stressor, is often rooted in learned behaviors shaped by family and past experiences. Recognizing prevalent stress reactions is crucial for developing effective coping strategies (Bondarchuk et al., 2024).

Findings reveal that young adults adopt various coping mechanisms and strategies to handle body shaming. Smith-Jackson, Reel, and Thackeray (2011) reported that first-year college students with negative body image, influenced by media, societal, and peer pressure, coped by exercising, healthy eating, changing their appearance, talking to friends or family, engaging in religious or spiritual practices, spending time alone, and practicing self-acceptance. Gam et al. (2020) found that some students resorted to absenteeism to avoid peer shaming at school. Bondarchuk et al. (2024) reported that coping mechanisms vary and can be either problem-focused—aimed at altering the situation by understanding the problem and strategizing solutions—or emotion-focused—aimed at managing emotional equilibrium through humor, denial, or positive reframing. Ismail and Abdussalam (2022) found that adolescents used emotion-focused coping strategies like self-love, journaling, ignoring shamers, and self-acceptance, while their problem-focused strategies included seeking support from parents or friends. Additionally, Arumugam et al. (2022) showed that practicing self-compassion helped those who had been body-shamed become less negatively self-conscious.

These coping efforts involve a process of learning, which is defined as the acquisition of knowledge, attitudes, and skills through experience, leading to lasting behavioral changes (Kakongoro, 2019). In the context of adult education, learning can be formal, non-formal, or informal. Informal learning—which is experiential, incidental, and unstructured—involves acquiring new knowledge, understanding, skills, or attitudes consciously or unconsciously through everyday interactions and experiences (Mejiuni, Cranton & Táíwò, 2015).

Although body shaming has been examined across genders, ages, and contexts, limited research explores how young adults learn to cope with shaming based on the specific body parts targeted, the settings of the shaming, and its impacts. This study addresses these gaps by exploring the nature, contexts, and impacts of body shaming on university

undergraduates and the dynamics of learning they acquire to navigate and cope for immediate and lifelong adaptability.

Methodology

This qualitative study explored the experiences of body-shamed undergraduate students at Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, Nigeria. A case study approach was adopted to gain an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon within a bounded system (Coombs, 2022). Twelve final-year female undergraduates were conveniently sampled from the Faculties of Education, Arts, and Technology. Purposive sampling ensured that only those who had experienced body shaming were included.

Data were gathered using a semi-structured interview guide and were audio-recorded with the participants' consent. Each interview lasted approximately seven minutes. The interview guide consisted of open and probing questions about the participants' body shaming experiences. Informed consent, confidentiality (using pseudonyms), and anonymity were assured. The data were thematically analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six phases: familiarizing with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and reporting.

Trustworthiness, several strategies were employed to establish trustworthiness—specifically credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability—in this qualitative research, as stipulated by Lincoln and Guba (1985). Credibility was ensured by triangulating participant engagement, member checking, and peer debriefing to validate findings and mitigate researcher bias. While detailed individual descriptions were omitted for brevity, transferability was supported through contextual and demographic information sufficient for readers to assess relevance to other settings. Furthermore, dependability was ensured through an auditing approach that provided detailed records of research decisions, data collection, and analysis. Additionally, colleagues verified procedures and supported the inferences. For confirmability, the researcher ensured that participants' experiences were reported exactly as contained in the well-organized, stored, and backed-up recordings and transcriptions obtained from the study.

Results and Discussion

Themes were generated from the collected data, which guided the discussion of the findings. Table 1 presents the biographic details of the participants. All participants are identified by pseudonyms to prioritize anonymity and confidentiality. Since religion was not a basis for recruitment, the predominance of Christian participants was coincidental rather than intentional. Additionally, twelve final-year students (in part four or five) were selected, four from each of the three faculties. This suggests they would have accumulated significant experiences throughout their academic careers.

Table 1: Participants' Biographic Details

S/N	Participant's Pseudonyms	Age	Religion	Marital Status	Faculty	Level
1	Glowie	24	Christianity	Single	Arts	400
2	Nancy	22	Christianity	Single	Education	400
3	Love	23	Christianity	Single	Education	400
4	Maggie	24	Christianity	Single	Technology	500
5	Ada	23	Christianity	Single	Education	400
6	Bisi	25	Christianity	Married	Arts	400
7	Tolani	21	Christianity	Single	Technology	500
8	Tito	23	Christianity	Single	Technology	500
9	Banke	23	Christianity	Single	Arts	400
10	Biola	22	Christianity	Single	Technology	500
11	Millie	22	Christianity	Single	Education	400
12	Funke	24	Christianity	Single	Arts	400

Research Question one: What are the forms of body shaming experienced by female undergraduates in OAU and where do they occur?

The themes and statements from participants on the forms of body shaming and the contexts where they occur are presented in Table 2. Analysis showed that participants experienced body parts and physical features-based shaming and verbal body shaming, name calling and other expressions while the shaming occurred within academic, home, family and romantic relationships, public spaces and social circles contexts with respective body shamers.

TABLE 2: Forms of body shaming and the contexts of occurrences

	Theme	Statements from Participants
Forms of body shaming	Body parts and physical features-based shaming	<i>I was body shamed for having a very small breast or no breast at all for my age and class; I was shamed for my nose...I have a small nose and it opens up whenever I smile...it expands; I was body shamed for my eyes; I have this condition called alopecia; It started when I entered university... I added weight...I had a big stomach; I have been body shamed for my height and stature; my body shaming is that I am short; people insult...because I have bow legs; ...people will be like, you are too thin; a part of my body that has been...shamed, it will be my collar bone and my legs, because I have very thin legs while my collar bone is very obvious... pour water here(collar bone) and it will...hold it in.</i>
	Verbal body shaming, name calling and other expressions	<i>Mammy water; flat chest; dry bone; long neck; expanding nose; tiger nose; fat pig; smally; chicken legs , C. Ronaldo, tirin gbeku (gaunt person); Maltina bottle; "toothpick; oju yobo (pop eyes); You need to eat more, add flesh; you are too thin</i>
Contexts and perpetrators	Academic Context	<i>my roommate in the hostel once in a while; colleagues in school; my course mates in the university; they are mostly guys (males) in the school; I have been body shamed in the lecture hall by some hungry looking male classmates</i>

of Body Shaming	Home, Family and romantic relationship contexts	<i>my extended members... when we go for family occasions, also body shame me; my younger siblings and my parents at home; my fiancé; haaa! my cousins; my neighbours at home</i>
	Public Spaces	<i>I boarded a bus and... a woman dragged her child so that her child would not touch me ... I could tell the child wanted to ask “aunty what happened to your hair?”; we closed from school I was walking home, some guys behind me were insulting me because I have bow legs; I was in church...when a small boy... said, “ leave here with your tiger nose!”</i>
	Social circles	<i>Most of my friends that know about it; basically, my friends body shame me; friends at gatherings.</i>

Body Parts and Physical Features-Based Shaming

Alopecia, small breasts, a small nose, height, stature, bow legs, and thinness were among the physical characteristics and body parts for which participants reported experiencing shame. These experiences are consistent with research by Zulkifli et al. (2023) and Okoli et al. (2023), who reported comparable instances of body shaming among college students based on appearance and body size. Body shaming is also described by Schlüter et al. (2023) as unwelcome or disparaging remarks about one's body that are frequently interpreted as deeply hurtful even though they may not be intended to cause harm.

Verbal Body Shaming, Name-Calling, and other Expressions

Name-calling such as “flat chest,” “dry bone,” “long neck,” “expanding nose,” “fat pig,” “chicken legs,” “C. Ronaldo,” *tirin gbeku* (Yoruba for a gaunt person), “toothpick,” and *oju yobo* (describing pop eyes) were among the demeaning and hurtful verbal remarks that participants reported hearing. Other remarks included “You need to eat more” and “You are too thin”. These phrases demonstrate the way in which verbal abuse serves as a kind of body shaming. These results are in line with Mustafa et al. (2022), who found that negative comments and name-calling are frequent forms of body shaming among young people.

Contexts and perpetrators of Body Shaming

Findings showed that participants reported experiencing body shaming in multiple contexts. Roommates, colleagues and course mates especially the male ones were frequently the offenders, and the academic environment—including residence halls, lecture halls, and the larger university community—was a prominent setting. This is consistent with the findings of Kenny et al. (2017) and Deviantony et al. (2024), that body shaming is fuelled by peer pressure in educational environments, especially when students deviate from appearance standards. Other important contexts included the home and romantic relationships, where participants experienced shaming from partners and family, frequently reinforcing negative stereotypes. Both strangers and members of the religious community participated in public places like streets, churches, and buses. Additionally, within social circles—friends and peers—also participated in shaming highlighting the impact of peer expectations and societal norms on appearance-related pressure.

Research Question two: What is the impact of body shaming on the wellbeing of female undergraduates?

Table 3 presents the impact of body shaming on participants as social; emotional and psychological; self-esteem and identity impact; and spiritual questioning.

Table 3: Impacts of body shaming on female undergraduates' well being

Theme	Statements from Participants
Social impact	<i>I have to wear two bras to make it (her breasts) look big...I became an introvert...no unnecessary mingling with people...only when important; I feel like there is no point, let me just stay back and not interact that much...so becoming a shadow of myself...I allow others take the lead...it kills my ego; I have been restricted to socialise freely; when everybody is going out, you can't because you will feel like I don't want to...it is when people will be like, "see this slim girl!...it is now like a stigma; I could not have friends like others</i>
Emotional and Psychological Impact	<i>I feel down once in a while when it (shaming) gets to me; stress...because on the long run you start thinking that "what can I do to gain weight?...it has really affected me mentally; It affected me so bad that I will be down, depressed because I used to have hair but now I no longer have hair; It wasn't really nice having to deal with the fact that you have people frequently asking you, 'why are you like this? It just spoils my mood... ruins the day for me?'; I feel bad and embarrassed most times...everyone wants to confirm if I actually have a very small nose; Ha! In front of everybody, I really felt embarrassed because all eyes were fixed on me; I feel bad (when body shamed)"; just a little bit hurt</i>
Self-esteem and identity impact	<i>I feel less of myself having a small nose, so I am always conscious of it which I cannot change; there are sometimes I will want to do something and I have to consider that guy you are short will they allow you? Can you go in for that?; I lost my self-confidence especially when in school and the public</i>
Spiritual questioning	<i>It affected me spiritually to the extent that I wrote it in my prayer point and my everyday prayer that God should help me, I am a human like others, so why having a flat chest?; I did not want to go to church again because I felt God did not exist, "why will He allow such a thing to happen to me?"</i>

Social Impact

Due to body shaming, participants reported social disengagement and decreased engagement in public and academic contexts, frequently avoiding social interactions and remaining silent. This supports the findings of Schluger (2025), who pointed out that body shaming can cause anxiety, depression, and a desire to avoid places and situations where shaming might take place such as schools or other contexts. Zulkifli et al. (2023) found that body-shamed undergraduates experience social isolation as a result of feeling pressured to achieve an ideal body, avoiding social interaction, and

continuously worrying about how others see them. The participants' feelings of isolation are consistent with their findings.

Emotional and Psychological Impact

Participants who were subjected to body shaming experienced profound emotional and psychological repercussions, frequently becoming depressed or in a bad mood. These results resulted from emotions of shame, rage, and embarrassment brought on by people's public scrutiny of their bodies or physical characteristics. Similar effects were noted by Mondol (2024), who reported that body-shamed undergraduates in Bangladesh often experienced emotional distress, depression, and inferiority, aligning with Zulkifli et al. (2023) who observed that body shaming among youth has serious psychological and physical repercussions.

Self-esteem and Identity Impact

The findings showed that because of their experiences with body shaming, participants frequently doubted their identity and value (self-worth). Deviantony et al. (2024) found that body shaming has a negative impact on self-esteem, especially for those who are trying to fit in with their peer group. These emotional struggles are consistent with their findings. Other people's opinions and judgements add to stress and a negative body image in such vulnerable situations.

Spiritual questioning

The results showed that while some participants sought assistance from God as a result of body shaming, others wondered why God permitted the shaming to happen or why He allowed the condition that caused the shaming to happen to them. In reaction to the emotional distress brought on by body shaming, participants wrestled with their faith, reflecting a moment of spiritual questioning.

Research Question three: What lessons have the body shamed persons learnt to cope with their experience in OAU?

Findings showed the lessons participants had garnered to cope with their body shaming experiences to include: self-love, acceptance, care and confidence building; seek support; shifted perspectives; nutrition, healthy living, and body enhancement efforts; trivialise and/or walk away from mockery; confrontation and resistance; as well as education and sensitisation.

Table 4: Lessons learnt to cope with body shaming

Theme	Statements from Participants
Self-Love, Acceptance, care and Confidence Building	<i>I tried getting oils for hair growth but they were not helpful for me...until I understood my condition; when I gained self-confidence, I stopped using wigs and covering my hair; I do not feel bad or let it get to me. I feel this is me and I cannot change it. So, I now have positive perspectives towards body shaming ...I have learnt to see myself as the best in my own body and improve myself emotionally to avoid depression; Initially, I didn't like my legs: "why is my leg like this?" but as time went by, I actually realised that they are cute, the cutest part of my body right now;; I motivate myself, I feel confident in myself.... so, I feel confident in who I am regardless of what is going on around me; Self-discovery worked, this is who I am, this is how I am. No matter what anybody tells me, it still doesn't change the kind of person I am. Even if I grow fatter than I am now, people will still talk, you cannot satisfy people, so just be yourself. I learned to admire my body, the self-esteem, confidence because nobody will do that for you; Before, I lost my self-confidence, but I helped myself and accepted myself the way I am: 'this is me!' So, I stopped allowing people's comments get to me; I learnt to appreciate myself; Before, I did not like my body...I never knew I had a nice shape...now, I really feel dope...I love my shape; I have learnt to have confidence in myself and it has really helped me to deal with body shaming; I motivate myself, I feel confident in myself...in my body. So, I feel confident in who I am regardless of what is going on around me; I attend motivational programmes to build up my self-confidence.</i>
Seeking Support	<i>I joined a support group of the people that have alopecia where we meet and talk about it stuffs and help each other to increase our self-esteem... I flaunt my bald head with pride; I have short cute friends so we see the best in each other.</i>
Shifted perspectives	<i>Like my perspective then was that body shaming is right, they all want the best for me by telling me to add weight but later... I realised that body shaming is not something that should be happening</i>
Nutrition, Healthy living, and Body Enhancement efforts	<i>I wear two bras and intend to buy breast enlargement oil; I started following a routine on food that will help me in gaining weight. I also learned how to know and eat food that help in gaining weight. I learnt more about food</i>
Trivialise, walk away from mockery	<i>When I am body shamed, it is either I walk away, overlook it and continue with my conversation to walk away from body shaming; one of the things I did was to flow with it. I learn to laugh along, it's your problem. I try to take it away from my mind not to keep thinking about it</i>

Confrontation and Resistance	<i>when you say nonsense, I give it to you hot; whenever I am body shamed I retaliate immediately...I don't even laugh it away with you. So, I don't feel less of myself; When someone body shames me, I smack back with full force; I choose to face those that body shame me; I stood my ground to not let it get to me; If you insult me, I will also insult you back... I don't let it get to me.</i>
Education & Sensitisation	<i>I will tell them to live for themselves...don't live your life on how people are judging you... based on people's expectations and how they want you to be, but live it on who you are and who you want to be. Make people understand that if they cannot deal with it, they are on their own, deal with it yourself and be confident the way you are; People that body shame ...probably they are saying it for fun, but... it takes a lot from the person being body shamed unknowingly to the people saying it. They should accept the person for who he or she is and just live with it because body shaming is a really bad thing and is even common among learned people (elite) which is not supposed to be; admire yourself...look at yourself in the mirror and be like, "I am beautiful." If you are too fat, you can go online, talk to people, learn how you can burn your fat. But don't give up —tell yourself, "I am beautiful and wonderfully made by God."; I have learnt to tell people: "do not focus on what people say to the extent that it will make you uncomfortable or let it get to you....let God be your motivator, because even in the Bible it is said that we are created in the image of God; ...we should be able to live with it and stop having headache about it so be yourself and be fine; I had to educate her that alopecia is just a condition not a disease, I could feel the tension was relieved; people can be really insensitive....so, I let them know that they do not treat people like that.</i>

Self-Love, Acceptance, Care and Confidence Building

Over time, participants came to develop confidence, self-love, and acceptance as personal coping mechanisms for body shaming. These initiatives represent emotionally focused coping mechanisms found by Ismail and Abdussalam (2022). In a similar vein, Arumugam et al. (2022) discovered that people who were body-shamed developed self-compassion and gained more respect of themselves. Choosing to value one's body instead of resenting it promotes body positivity and lowers emotional tiredness, so fostering resilience and self-compassion according to Schluger (2025) and *Preventing and Combating Body Shaming* (2022).

Seeking support

Results reveal that participants actively sought means of coping with body shaming by means of official and unofficial support groups comprising people having similar experiences. These groups helped them to understand their reactions and feelings. Schluger (2025) discovered that having a safe outlet to communicate feelings connected to body shaming greatly helps people control the anxiety and shame that usually accompany it.

Shifted perspectives

Analysis showed that experiences such as those garnered from body shaming have a possibility of bringing about a shift in previously held perspectives. For instance, participants attested to shifts from accepting body shaming remarks as well-meaning to realising its damage. This change is in line with the idea of critical consciousness as proposed by Freire (1970) which involves processes which enables individuals to take action against system of oppression having analysed and understood these systems. They had shifted their views from seeing body shaming as right to accepting themselves for whom whether they are body shamed or not and in spite of societal pressures. As highlighted in Spinner (2022), dancers develop this resilience by challenging body norms and embracing their bodies' inherent worth, regardless of appearance. Also, Choate (2005) cited in Chauhan (2024) identified that a good perception of one's physical appearance, effective strategies to cope, were among the five-factor model for body image resilience.

Nutrition, Healthy living, and Body Enhancement Efforts

The results showed participants' personal response to body shaming, characterised by persistent efforts to use multiple bras, interest in breast enhancement products, dedication to wearing heels with colour-coordinated outfits, attempts to gain weight through internet research and adopting dietary changes. This pattern shows how body shaming can lead to self-directed changes geared towards perceived inadequacies rather than self-acceptance.

Trivialise, walk away from mockery

The results showed participants choosing to respond to, laugh off, ignore, or mentally detach from circumstances to preserve her emotional well-being, thus reflecting an emotional-focused coping mechanism in response to body shaming. This aligns with Bondarchuk et al. (2024), who categorise such strategies under emotion-focused coping aimed at restoring emotional balance.

Confrontation and Resistance

Retaliating immediately and standing one's ground portrayed participants' assertive response to body shaming, thereby exhibiting a high sense of self-esteem and an unwillingness to accept negative judgments. This approach resonates with Onditi's (2023) observation, which portrayed a higher assertive level among adolescents to utilise direct revenge as a means of coping with cyberbullying. Although in their submission, being assertive could deter future instances of body shaming, it could also lead to increased conflict, thus signifying the complicated nature of the adopted coping mechanisms.

Education & Sensitisation

The findings reflect the importance of education and awareness-raising by participants to cope with body shaming. Participants' learning to cope with body shaming has not only helped them develop self-confidence and self-acceptance as highlighted in Ismail & Abdussalam's (2022) description of emotion focused strategies by not allowing other

people's opinion define or affect them. It has also translated into becoming educators who intentionally share information and providing insights to others about certain health and body-related conditions like alopecia based on their lived experiences. Participants lived experiences have led to the construction of knowledge, development of and internalisation of ideas which they apply to life contexts such as reducing stigma and correcting misconceptions (Kakongoro, 2019). This is in tune with the principle of experiential and informal learning in adult education.

Conclusion

Given that this study set out to provide insights into the underreported lived experiences, coping and learning outcomes of body-shamed Nigerian female undergraduates, the findings showed that body shaming manifested in a variety of forms, and occurring in a variety of contexts and settings could have far reaching effects on the body shamed especially when unmanaged. Nevertheless, the efforts to cope with body shaming often brought about meaningful learning experiences. These experiences could be drawn upon to foster lifelong learning by equipping individuals with resilience, reflective capacity, and adaptive skills that enable them to manage body shaming and apply these competencies to other related life challenges.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following are recommended:

1. Targeted awareness and sensitisation campaigns should be organised by university support and wellbeing services — such as the counselling unit, adult educators, and mental health practitioners for male students, lecturers, roommates, families, and religious leader to address body shaming, promote respect for diversity in appearance and human dignity in academic, religious and private spaces.
2. Universities should establishment and enforcement anti-body shaming policies and anonymous body-shaming reporting channels to reduce incidences.
3. Universities, students and organisational bodies should establish support mechanisms that provide safe spaces for addressing body shaming, expressing body image concerns, and enhancing healthy self-esteem.
4. The Department of Adult Education and Lifelong Learning should deepen engagement with issues of body shaming and its consequences into the B.Ed curriculum, while also advocating for the inclusion of body shaming awareness in general university courses.
5. Religious leaders should be enlisted to provide faith-based support for students struggling with body shaming and attendant spiritual concerns.
6. Formal, non-formal, and informal structures should be instituted by relevant university bodies—such as adult educators, counsellors, and mental health experts—alongside partners outside the university to enhance students' self-confidence, self-acceptance, and resilience, while fostering self-reflection, storytelling, and resistance to oppressive stereotypes, and the ability to make sense of their lived experiences to educate others.

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