

The Origins of Slut-shaming Phenomenon in High School Campus

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Abstract: The present study examines the pervasive issue of slut-shaming, a phenomenon characterized by the disparaging and evaluative treatment of adolescent females who are deemed to engage in sexual behavior or have multiple sexual partners, frequently predicated on hearsay and conjecture. The objective of this study is to examine the occurrence of slut-shaming in high school settings and to ascertain the potential social, cultural, and psychological determinants that may impact this conduct. The researcher undertook a qualitative investigation of the occurrences of slut-shaming among high school students and formulated approaches aimed at averting and addressing the issue. According to the research, slut-shaming is a widespread problem that impacts adolescents globally, leading to adverse outcomes such as diminished self-worth, psychological distress, and social exclusion among the victims. The ramifications of engaging in slut-shaming behavior can be severe. Despite the negative impact it has on individuals, this practice persists in high school settings, and there is limited comprehension regarding the underlying factors that contribute to its prevalence. The study concludes by employing a semi-structural interview technique to examine the fundamental elements of female-oriented stigma that arise from “slut-shaming.” The aim is to promote a secure and supportive atmosphere for all students, devoid of the detrimental consequences of slut-shaming.

Keywords: gender stereotype, gender difference, slut-shaming, adolescents

1. Introduction

Slut-shaming, the derogatory and judgmental treatment of young women who are perceived to be sexually active or promiscuous, often based on rumors and gossip, is a widespread problem that affects high school students worldwide. In general, the public can view behaviour like this as a projection of the long-standing stigma towards sex and body against women in our society. According to England and Bearak’s study [1], they found the sexual double standard and gender differences in university students’ attitudes towards casual sex. Women who engage in casual sex are frequently stigmatised as “sluts,” whereas men are praised for their sexual conquests. This double standard is an illustration of how society projects the stigma against women. According to their findings, men are more likely than women to have favourable attitudes towards casual sex. Men who engage in casual sex frequently face less harsh criticism than women. The consequences of slut-shaming can be devastating, resulting in low self-esteem, mental health issues, and social isolation for those targeted.

Despite the damage it causes, slut-shaming continues to be practised in high schools, and very little is understood about the factors that contribute to its widespread occurrence. This study aims to investigate the phenomenon of slut-shaming on high school campuses and to identify the social, cultural, and psychological factors that may influence such behaviour. By conducting a qualitative study of student experiences with slut-shaming in high schools and developing strategies for prevention and intervention, the author hopes to achieve the goal of gaining a better understanding of the dynamics of slut-shaming in high schools.

Eventually, this research attempts to use a semi-structural interview method to investigate the essential factors of female-focused stigma based on “slut-shaming,” and to contribute to a safer and more supportive environment for all students, free of the harmful effects of slut-shaming.

2. Methodology

2.1. Participants

There were a total of ten students from four high different high schools in Beijing who participated in the research, five females and five males. The ten interviewees included high school students from a variety of educational systems, including the traditional Chinese college entrance examination system, the International Baccalaureate system, and the international programme. All of the people who were interviewed were at least one year into their full-time high school education and had completed at least nine years of the state’s mandatory educational requirements. The average age of the people who were interviewed was 17.

2.2. Interview Outline

During the interview portion of the activity, the participant will be given five guiding questions regarding the topic. They will be free to give personal ideas and answers at any time during the interview. The questions are centred around the participants’ observations and understanding of the slut-shaming behaviour, and aim to find real-life evidence to support the three hypotheses developed by the previous research regarding the origins of slut-shaming. These questions will progress from superficial to in-depth, from general to more specific, encouraging the interviewee to reflect even more deeply and provide the most truthful responses (see Table 1). Additionally, the interviewer would add impromptu trivia questions and comments as the conversation went along to direct the interviewee’s thoughts.

Table 1: Interview outline of this study.

No.	Questions
1	What does the term “slut-shaming” mean to you?
2	Have you ever witnessed or experienced slut-shaming on your campus or in your community?
3	Do you think slut-shaming is harmful? Why? (or in what way)
4	Do you think there’s a certain kind of people who are more likely to do that? (rich, patriarchy, player boys)
5	What role can bystanders play in preventing slut-shaming?

2.3. Process

All individual interviews were conducted as face-to-face conversations in a closed, soundproofed, and separate room to protect participants’ anonymity. Everyone who participated in the interviews

and signed the necessary informed consent documents. The recordings were all transcribed and stored on mobile devices. In addition, an average interview duration of 25 minutes.

3. Findings

The following section will present the findings derived from the analysis, summary, and compilation of the ten interviews regarding the causes and status of slut-shaming in Chinese high schools. The part will begin by describing the prevalence, severity, and students' perceptions of slut shaming on Chinese high school campuses, as revealed by the interviews. Second, three potential causes of slut-shaming were listed: direct attacks from the opposite sex, indirect attacks from the same sex, and implications and education women received from a patriarchal society.

Eight of the ten interviewed students reported having witnessed slut-shaming on their high school campus or community, and five provided examples of it occurring to them or their close friends. This results indicate that slut-shaming is a prevalent issue, one that impacts a significant number of high school students. The students believe this is something that many people have or are experiencing. Those who participated in the interviews nearly all reported that it was a "real problem" (Alison, 16, female) that greatly interfered with the behavior and thoughts of high school students, even to the point of interfering with each individual's daily life, such as social activities, dressing, or mannerisms. It can be concluded that slut shaming is a widely prevalent phenomenon in Chinese high school campuses, with an enormous influence and audience.

3.1. Direct Attack from the Opposite Sex

When students were asked which group they believed was most likely to engage in slut shaming, the collected interviews revealed that men answered most frequently at 100%. The relevant material appeared to be mentioned more than 30 times overall. Most students agreed that men are among the most significant groups to engage in such aggressive behaviour. According to the compilation, seven of the interviewees reported hearing male students call female students "slut" or "bitch". All of the men's direct verbal shaming of women as described occurred in public: for example, in public open spaces (playground, classroom, auditorium) or public groups (schoolmates, online social media platforms).

In the interviews, several interviewees gave different examples to demonstrate the extensive involvement of men in slut-shaming behaviors. When mentioned, the students showed disgust and resentment, and each clearly stated that such behavior was "unbearable".

One interviewee recalled that during his junior high school years, girls wore white uniforms with short sleeves, which made their undergarments more visible in their profile. Many boys would converse loudly on the playground about the style and colour of girls' clothing, labeling those who wore dark colors as "sluts" because they believed that wearing black or laced bras signified seduction to them (Yancey, 17, male). In addition, another interviewee responded that she had heard rumors about women from men in high school simply because a girl had rejected his affection. The boy used indecent language and a "dismissive tone" to advertise to his friends and tell them that the girl was a "total bitch" (Alison, 16, female).

Even several of the female interviewees said they had personally experienced humiliation from men. Ashley, who is 17 years old, reported that she was subjected to slut-shaming by boys in her class for more than a year during middle school, which caused her great trauma and had a significant impact on her school life. According to her recollection, during lunch break, the bullies would gather the class together and read out loud fabricated pornographic clips about her out in public. Boys would examine her from head to toe as they passed her in the hallways like she's "a product or commodity". She was called a "whore" and a "cheap bitch" without having done any particular misbehaving. This

experience made her afraid to wear anything other than her school uniform, speak to other boys at school, and even after she graduated, she continued to have an aversion to junior high school. Another interviewee, Beverly, claimed that she was just having a normal relationship with her boyfriend, such as hugging and holding hands, and it was speculated by others that the two of them must have had sex experiences and spread it to a large crowd. This has caused many people who do not know her, including classmates and teachers, to have an initial negative opinion of her. As Beverly noted it lead her to some depressing emotions, “Also as a simple form of assault, slut shaming can easily create some feelings of bullying that have nothing to do with sex, the same as any other assault. I should mention this first, it is the most basic is the damage that is done as an attacked person.”

Not only females in the same age group but also interviewees reported slut-shaming from males towards women who have superior social status or are older, like their elder sisters or teachers. Both Beverly and Andrew mentioned in their interviews witnessing slut shame from high school students in their observation. “The guy just literally told everyone that teacher is, like, a slut and especially like boys in school. I’m pretty sure he made up all the rumors about how this teacher has multiple boyfriends of her similar age but also gives some ‘special treat’ too good-looking boys (Andrew, 17, male). It appears that verbal slut shaming works the same way for men despite the subject’s identity.

3.2. Indirect Attack from the Same Sex

In contrast to men, who primarily used direct methods of slut shaming, the interviews revealed that women predominantly used indirect methods. Slightly less than men, only five interviewees reported witnessing or experiencing same-sex slut-shaming, with “gossip,” “jealousy,” “pleasing men,” “competition,” and “objectification” being the most common related keywords. Apparently, interviewees agreed that slut shame from the same gender is not as much and frequently happens as verbal violence from male groups, yet the damage it causes is still severe.

According to the interviews, participants believed that same-sex slut-shaming would be less obvious and overt; this is evident from the comparison of keywords in the female group and those in the male group, with the female terms being relatively more descriptive and the male terms being completely insulting and derogatory swear words. Women disseminate rumors primarily in private, through small groups or friendship networks, which are the most prevalent and rapidly spread. Most examples indicate that if a girl is too excellent or attractive, she is more likely to be perceived by other women as a potential rival, and her likelihood of being stigmatized is relatively higher.

One of the interviewees described her friend’s experience with slut shaming from a female. In junior high, Judith, age 17, had a close female friend who, according to her, was a remarkable person: “And she’s like, really pretty. She is simply amazing. And not just that she’s pretty. I feel like she’s good at all aspects, and pretty is just one of her outstanding parts.” Her interests include photo shoots in nice clothes, makeup tutorial videos, and amateur modelling. However, this posed a potential threat to another modelling enthusiast at the same school. So, out of jealousy and to bolster her status, the other girl took photos of her without makeup at school without her permission. She posted them on social media platforms, announcing to netizens that what she had posted was a facade and the photos were her true appearance. The girl who posted the photo also spread rumors on the Internet, telling everyone that “she has multiple boyfriends” and “wears some very exposed dresses in school”. This is what Judith witnessed that happened to her friend, and this caused the girl not only suffers from depression but also to go to another school, even another city and even delete all her WeChat contact. As Judith reflected in the interview, “It was a traumatic and scary experience for her, and she still feels very traumatized and scared when she sees another girl on social media because they are in the same group.”(Judith, 17, female)

As in the case of Judith, some of these allegations involve social isolation experienced daily. Others involve verbal sarcasm, and in some instances, a great deal of malice. It is easy to see that

slut-shaming from the same sex is particularly influential and traumatic, ranging from the smallest of life experiences to the greatest of life-altering events and causing depression formation and questioning of oneself, just as Beverly revealed in her interview, “ I would be very sad to hear these malicious comments. I wouldn’t understand why I was being targeted, and I was just breathing and living.”

3.3. Implication and Education Given to Women by Society

Through the interviews, it is possible to obtain a non-negligible factor of the main components of slut shaming, which are society’s Implication and education of women. It is not part of the victim’s stigmatisation by a specific group, nor can it be attributed to a specific form of attack such as verbal or social isolation, unlike the gender-based attacks described above. According to the interviewees, it is more like “permeating every aspect of your life since you were a child” and “manifesting itself in your extracurricular classes, family, extensive social network, food, clothing, and housing, in addition to your school.”

The highest frequency of slut-shaming of women in society was reported by interviewees. Due to the number and complexity of the populations targeted, this attack can take many different forms; for this study, there are two criteria for determining whether or not an attack falls into this category: the first is that it is non-gender specific, such as slut shaming that involves both genders. The second standard is that the attack originates from a social context beyond the campus, such as within the family, on public social platforms (internet) such as social media and that the attacker is a member of the victim’s social circle. Based on this criterion, nine out of ten interviewees reported witnessing or experiencing slut-shaming at the social level, while five of them believed they were targeted for educational reasons, and seven agreed that it was rooted in social institutions and ideologies.

When asked about their experiences with slut-shaming, most interviewees immediately thought of the most prevalent and fundamental form of emergence: the victim guilt theory associated with sexual crimes. They argued that when a violent crime is committed against a woman, a group typically emerges in public opinion to accuse the female victim. These men and women are typically found in more conservative or less educated groups.

“And sometimes I think it’s more about micro-aggression like sometimes people don’t even realize it when they’re doing it. One of the cases I saw recently was a V-tuber playing a game. In the game, one of the characters was sexually assaulted by her boss, and after this V-tuber, which is a girl, after she saw the girl’s body and everything and she’s like ‘no wonder she got assaulted.’”(Sylvia, 16, female)

“Because I was living the culture where like if you’re being too pretty, you’re beautiful, you will not be thought of as a good girl or extraordinary girl. It’s like every girl is like in their nature they love beauty. But if you focus too much on beautiful on beauty, then you’ll be viewed as ‘too over’.” (Judith, 17, female)

In addition, both Sylvia and Alexander mentioned the brutal Tangshan assault that dominated social media in 2022. This incident is viewed as a clear manifestation of misogyny in society by high school students, and slut-shaming only appears in public opinion as a misogynistic manifestation. “Many people were like: “oh, she shouldn’t eat there at that time”, like “it’s too late”. But she’s not dressing very formally and everything’s fine, so I think that’s when people like start slut-shaming girls.”, said Sylvia, and she believes that it is not the victim’s fault, because if the perpetrators believe they can commit such crimes, they can beat up anyone they want, regardless of how the victim is dressed. In the incident discussion, Alexander also stated that a woman’s attire does not justify her being raped or committing an atrocity. “I mean, if in a society, a woman will be sort of deserve to be a victim just for living her own life, this is just unacceptable.”(Alexander, 17, male) In his idea, dressing in exposed clothes doesn’t equal being a slut, nor does it equals that others will have to right

to assault a woman in any circumstances.

As most interviewees recalled, this type of slut shaming concept has been instilled in the minds of individuals through education since early childhood. In their own words, they each described how they were taught to view sex as a disgrace. Some reported that when they were in kindergarten or elementary school, their parents would talk bad about females who were “sleeping around,” “dressing indecently,” or even implying that someone they saw on the street was engaged in sex trade and doing “that kind of work” simply because they wore an unconventional outfit. “... in our cultural mindset, chastity and sluttiness are serious-and allegedly wrong-for a woman. Perhaps in such a culture, we are taught from a young age to keep our chastity, which is very important for a woman. “(Beverly, 17, female). Naturally, children learned these social cues and conventions from their parents, and as they grew older, they developed the stigma of sex and their bodies; this stigma formed the very first concept of slut shame in each individual’s mind.

3.4. Discussion

While slut-shaming acts can come from various sources, including religious and cultural beliefs, some evolutionary psychologists suggest that it may be rooted in reproductive strategies that men have developed to improve their chances of passing on their genes to the next generation. According to Baumeister et al., slut-shaming behavior may be motivated by a desire to control female sexuality and prevent men from being deceived into investing resources in offspring that may not be biologically theirs [2]. The authors explain that “men have an adaptive problem in determining paternity, and there is evidence that men may have evolved strategies to deter female infidelity”. These strategies may include slut-shaming, as “the stigmatization of women who engage in promiscuous sexual behavior may discourage women from engaging in such behavior and signal to men that these women are not good prospects for long-term mating” [2].

However, while men may seek out multiple sexual partners, they are also threatened by the idea that women may do the same. This is because if a woman has multiple sexual partners, it increases the likelihood that the child she bears is not the man. In other words, the man cannot be certain that he is passing on his genes to the next generation. This fear is what may drive men to slut-shame women. By stigmatizing women who engage in sexual behavior, men may attempt to control their behavior and ensure their traits get the greatest chance to be passed on. This idea is supported by a study conducted by Fisher et al., which found that men who had a strong desire for casual sex were more likely to slut-shame women [3]. This is also consistent with the phenomenon described by the interviewees. Although adolescent males do not require these mating and reproduction strategies, their genes ensure they are born with them. When they perceive female behaviour that may be detrimental to them, such as donning nice clothes or having multiple close relationships, they interpret it subconsciously as a sign of favouritism towards other males and attack these females.

In addition to discouraging female infidelity, slut-shaming may improve male status and reproductive success. Baumeister et al explain that “men who can control the sexual behavior of women may have a higher social status and be more attractive to prospective mates” [2]. Thus, men who engage in slut-shaming may be perceived as enforcing social norms and demonstrating dominance, which can increase their reproductive success. This could also explain the collective aggression mentioned by the interviewed students, such as gathering with the same sex to make jokes about the colour of a female classmate’s bra or to spread rumours after being rejected by a female classmate: committing these acts allows these adolescent males to “show off” in the same-sex community, which is explained by the theory that they can secure their position in the male community and thus appear superior.

Regarding the discussion of direct attacks from the same sex, the reported behaviors lend themselves well to the theory of Intrasexual Competition. Darwin proposed sexual selection to

account for sex-differentiated traits that arise due to reproductive competition among members of the same sex [4]. Individuals of the same sex can compete to exclude rivals from mating, leading to the intrasexual selection of traits advantageous in contest competition (a mechanism commonly referred to as intrasexual competition), or they can compete to attract or charm individuals of the opposite sex, leading to intersexual selection of traits that increase the likelihood of being chosen. This is consistent with the frequent occurrence of “competition” in the interviews. In addition, most students agreed that slut shaming among women stems from or involves an element of competition. Despite the terminology commonly used to describe these two mechanisms of sexual selection, intrasexual competition underlies both selective components of sexual selection in a broad sense [5, 6].

In the context of woman-to-woman slut shaming, this competition is based on the idea that women compete with each other for the attention of men. This competition can result in negative attitudes towards women perceived to be more sexually promiscuous, as they are regarded as a threat to the potential mate pool of other women [7-9]. Multiple studies indicate that women who engage in slut shaming are more likely to engage in intrasexual competition. In a study conducted by Campbell [10], women primed with intrasexual competition were more likely to express negative attitudes towards sexually promiscuous women. Similarly, Vaillancourt et al. found that women who felt threatened by a sexually promiscuous woman were more likely to engage in slut shaming [7].

In high school, intrasexual competition can be particularly intense due to the increased focus on social status and peer acceptance. As a result, girl-to-girl slut shaming behavior can be prevalent in this environment. Studies have shown that girls in high school engage in slut shaming behavior as a way to enhance their social status and to gain favor with potential male partners [11]. The competition for male attention and approval can lead to negative attitudes towards girls perceived as more sexually promiscuous.

Despite of the insult from specific genders, the society also plays an important role in slut shaming behaviors. In societies where male dominance is prevalent, women are frequently subjected to derogatory comments and the practice of slut shaming. This is a commonly employed tactic by men to reinforce their patriarchal authority. The aforementioned conduct not only has adverse effects on the self-confidence of women, but it also sustains the prevalence of gender disparity and strengthens conventional gender norms. Szymanski and Gupta contend that the persistence of slut shaming conduct is largely attributed to social cues, including gender norms and peer pressure [12]. Research suggests that adherence to conventional masculinity norms, including traits such as aggression and dominance, is positively associated with the likelihood of engaging in slut shaming behavior directed towards females who deviate from traditional gender roles. Furthermore, the act of slut shaming is frequently employed as a mechanism to uphold conventional gender norms and preconceptions. Smiler and Epstein assert that traditional gender role beliefs are associated with a higher incidence of slut shaming among men [13]. This phenomenon is characterized by the stigmatization of women who are perceived to be sexually promiscuous. These beliefs perpetuate the idea that women are primarily responsible for fulfilling men’s needs and that men should have control over women’s sexuality.

Education can be crucial in shaping an individual’s attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors. In societies where males hold a dominant position, education can serve as a tool to reinforce gender-based expectations and sustain patriarchal authority. Ferrante and Russell contend that educational institutions substantially influence on the development of students’ perceptions regarding gender roles and sexuality [14]. The study revealed that educational institutions frequently endorse conventional gender norms, which foster the persistence of derogatory attitudes towards sexually active women.

Moreover, the act of slut shaming can frequently be attributed to inadequate knowledge regarding sexuality and gender. Prickett and Martin posit a correlation between a limited understanding of

sexuality and gender and the propensity to engage in slut shaming behavior [15]. The argument posits that providing comprehensive sexuality education can facilitate the acquisition of a more nuanced comprehension of sexuality and gender, thereby potentially mitigating the prevalence of slut shaming.

4. Conclusion

To summarize, this study has provided insight into the disturbingly common occurrence of slut-shaming within high school environments and the consequential negative effects it can have on the psychological and social welfare of adolescent females. With semi-structured interviews, this study explored the fundamental factors associated with the stigmatization of females. The findings of this research provide valuable insights into the dynamics of this detrimental behavior.

The research findings indicate that slut-shaming is frequently based on deeply entrenched gender stereotypes, cultural conventions, and societal assumptions regarding women's sexual conduct. The text underscores the potential of evolutionary psychology theories to elucidate instances of slut shaming behavior, regardless of whether males or females initiate it.

Various prevention and intervention strategies have been identified to enhance the situation in response to the factors above. These strategies entail establishing of secure and supportive settings that promote truthful communication, empathy, and respect for diversity. The provision of comprehensive sex education is essential in addressing the negative effects of slut-shaming and in enabling young women to make informed choices regarding their sexual health and overall wellness. Additionally, the process fosters bystander intervention and advocates for affirmative messaging that contests the detrimental misconceptions and stereotypes associated with female sexuality.

In brief, this study has contributed to the comprehension of the mechanisms underlying slut-shaming in secondary educational institutions and has identified key determinants that impact this deleterious conduct. The proposal has put forth efficacious tactics for both prevention and intervention, aimed at establishing a secure and encouraging atmosphere for every student, devoid of the detrimental consequences of slut-shaming. This research aspires to enhance cognizance and stimulate additional investigation and initiatives aimed at eliminating the practice of slut-shaming in secondary educational institutions and the broader community.

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