ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Body Shaming: an Exploratory Study on its Definition and Classification

Constanze Schlüter[1] · Gerda Kraag[1] · Jennifer Schmidt[2]

Abstract

Body shaming (BS) is a popular term for a type of negative social interaction, which frequently occurs in social media. However, there is a lack of a clear scientific definition of BS and data on its relation to other concepts in social aggression research. The present study therefore aimed at providing a definition and classification of BS. In an exploratory online-study, 25 participants (60%) provided personal definitions of BS and rated the fit of a suggested definition. In addition, they reported similarities with and differences to related concepts (appearance teasing, cyberbullying, trolling). We conducted qualitative analyses of the verbal definitions guided by the Grounded Theory approach and quantified the fit to existing concepts in the field of social aggression. The results show that BS is perceived as an unrepeated act in which a person expresses unsolicited, mostly negative opinions/comments about a target's body, without necessarily intending to harm him/her. Still, the target perceives the comments as negative. BS can range from well-meant advice to malevolent insults and it can occur online and offline. Participants saw similarities between BS and appearance teasing. BS can be a tool for trolling and can evolve to cyberbullying with repetition over time. Altogether, BS is a form of social aggression that has a negative impact on individuals. The definition and classification help to investigate BS and its effects on body image and mental health in future research.

Keywords Body shaming · Appearance teasing · Cyberbullying · Trolling · Social media

Introduction

"Looking-glass upon the wall, who is fairest of us all?" The judgment of one's appearance is a common phenomenon, which some individuals try to avoid, while others actively seek for it. As in traditional fairy tales, self-presentation (de Vries et al., 2016), social comparisons, and evaluations play an important role on social media networking sites like Instagram, Facebook, or Tumblr (Hummel & Smith, 2015; Pempek et al., 2009). However, the increased popularity of social media (Perloff, 2014) has given rise to a dark side of communication. Besides "likes" and positive feedback, negative appearance-related commentary overshadows the

online world. Such comments—in the virtual, as well as in the real world—brought a specific term into being: *Body shaming*. Despite the growing popularity of the term, to our knowledge, no scientific definition has been suggested. Therefore, the goal of our research is to find out what people understand by the term "body shaming" in order to create a basis for future research on this phenomenon.

Internet search engine use shows that the term "body shaming" has become increasingly popular in the public. The frequency of the search term in Google shows a steady increase during the past 5 years (Google Trends, 2019). According to a study conducted by Yahoo Health with 2000 participants aged 13–64 years, 94% of adolescent females and 64% of adolescent males experienced being shamed online related to their bodies (Miller, 2016). According to Gam et al. (2020), the 1-year prevalence of body shaming among school-going adolescents ($n = 359$) is 44.9%. Other studies addressed the consequences of body shaming on people's health and behavior. For example, body shaming has been found to reduce body confidence (Fauzia & Rahmiaji, 2019), might possibly influence eating behaviors (Flak,

✉ Jennifer Schmidt
j.schmidt@fh-muenster.de

1   Faculty of Psychology and Neuroscience, Maastricht University, Universiteitssingel 40, 6229 Maastricht, ER, Netherlands

2   Muenster School of Health, FH Münster University of Applied Sciences, Leonardo-Campus 8, 48149 Münster, Germany

2021), school absenteeism (Gam et al., 2020), and increases levels of distress and insecurity (Sugiati, 2019).

Various definitions of body shaming have spread across non-scientific internet sites. For example, body shaming can be defined as "inappropriate negative statements and attitudes toward another person's weight or size" (Informational Sites Collective, 2012) or as an "action or practice of humiliating someone by making mocking or critical comments about their body shape or size" (Oxford University Press, 2019a). Other more general descriptions state that body shaming is a practice in which "people are—literally—put to shame because of their bodies" (FOCUS Online, 2018).

Based on a synthesis of existing descriptions on the internet, we would describe body shaming as an unrepeated action in which a person expresses unsolicited, mostly negative opinions or comments about the target's body, which can take place in both, social media and in the real world. As the term *body shaming* suggests, a reference to the appearance or to the body of the target is central. Body shaming does not necessarily intend to harm the victim. It may also arise from well-meant advice (e.g., medically based advice from a friend: "You should reduce your weight to prevent high blood pressure"). In contrast to *fat shaming* (i.e., mockery or criticism about someone judged to be fat or overweight; Oxford University Press, 2019b), body shaming does not solely target overweight individuals. For example, lean individuals or specific body parts can also fall victim to body shaming (e.g., "You need some meat on your bones," "Your legs look nasty"). We therefore suggest that body shaming is an umbrella term for more specific phenomena like weight-, fat-, or skinny-shaming.

In addition to the lack of a definition, body shaming is not clearly distinguished from other similar constructs known from Social and Clinical Psychology. For example, the previous statements indicate potential similarities to *appearance teasing* (AT), which manifests in negative social feedback on an individual's physical characteristics (e.g., weight, facial features, or hair; Cash, 1995). Body shaming features similarities to AT, which describes negative social feedback on a person's physical attributes (Cash, 1995). AT can range from relatively good-natured comments from a close friend to malevolent expressions from strangers or bullies, which then border on appearance harassment (Furman & Thompson, 2002). Hence, AT and body shaming display several similarities so that body shaming might be a specific facet of AT. Yet, we would assume potential differences between body shaming and AT: In general, teasing is, by definition, a repeated act (Smith et al., 2002), whereas body shaming may also occur as a single act. Additionally, research on AT mainly focused on offline contexts, while body shaming takes place in social media for the most part. Furthermore, teasing traditionally describes negative *verbal* commentary

(Furman & Thompson, 2002), whereas body shaming may also occur in written form (esp. in social media).

Lumsden and Morgan (2017) classified body shaming as a subtype of *trolling*, which is an event of online abuse. Trolling describes acts in which groups or individuals post offensive messages (Lumsden & Morgan, 2017) and behave in a delusive, destructive, or dismissive way in a social setting on the Internet without apparent intention (Buckels et al., 2014). Because trolling and cyberbullying are regarded as distinct forms of online abuse (Lumsden & Morgan, 2017), we also need to distinguish body shaming from cyberbullying.

Cyberbullying is defined as an aggressive deliberate act, carried out by an individual or a group, using electronic sources, frequently repeated over time against a victim who is not able to defend him- or herself easily (Smith et al., 2008, p. 376). The electronic forms of contact can be smartphones, e-mails, chat rooms, and social media networking sites (Patchin & Hinduja, 2006). According to this definition, there are similarities between cyberbullying and body shaming in terms of the respective means and channels. However, there are also potential differences: Similar to AT, cyberbullying is per definition frequently repeated over time, whereas body shaming might occur in the form of single commentaries. In contrast to cyberbullying, body shaming may not be restricted to the online environment, and in contrast to body shaming, cyberbullying can target other aspects than a person's appearance.

However, borders between the mentioned related constructs (AT, cyberbullying, and trolling) and body shaming seem blurred so that potential differences need to be explored. Therefore, the overall goals of this study are (a) to develop an empirically supported definition of body shaming and (b) to demarcate this term from related constructs.

For this purpose, we created an exploratory online-study to qualitatively assess participants' personal definitions of body shaming and quantify the agreement and disagreements regarding the overlap of body shaming and related concepts in social aggression research.

Method

For the implementation of the exploratory study, we used *Qualtrics* (www.qualtrics.com) as a platform to administer semi-structured interviews with open-ended answer formats for qualitative content analyses. Before study participation, we informed volunteers about the reasons for and interests of the research, the voluntary participation, and data handling. Participants were allowed to decline their participation at any time without providing reasons. The participant's identity remained anonymous. All procedures of this study were in line with the Declaration of Helsinki. The Ethics

Review Committee Psychology and Neuroscience (ERCPN) at Maastricht University provided ethical approval for the study (reference number: Master_207_17_04_2019).

Sample

The target sample consisted of German- and English-speaking adult participants in the general population. Inclusion criteria were legal age (≥ 18 years) and sufficient knowledge of German or English language. We excluded volunteers, who indicated that they were not familiar with the term "body shaming" because they could not contribute to the definition. All participants had to provide informed consent for study participation. To determine the sample's sociodemographic characteristics, we included questions about the participants' gender (*male/female/other*), age (in years), and first language.

Further, we asked participants about their highest educational achievement, their current employment status, and their nationality. Because data analysis in this exploratory study is based on the Grounded Theory approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1996), we aimed at assessing a minimum sample size of $N = 20$ (Creswell, 1998). After pilot testing, we recruited participants via WhatsApp, e-mail, and telephone recruitment and collected data over a period of 5 weeks, from March to May 2019.

Instruments

We used a self-administered semi-structured online-interview with open-ended questions to obtain information about participants' understanding of body shaming and its relationship to similar concepts. These questions addressed (in the following order) the participant's initial understanding of body shaming (Q1), agreement to similarities, or differences of the three related constructs of social aggression (Q2-Q4) and the agreement or disagreement with our suggested definition (see Appendix 1). With this sequence, we avoided biasing participant responses with our suggested definition and refrained from being too directive. Data and themes were acquired and identified inductively to find out if the relevant topics are covered by our suggested definition or if the definition has to be adjusted. Another focus of our interest was the quantified frequencies of mentions, terms, and topics to display their respective relevance in the understanding of the construct of body shaming.

Procedure

Participants accessed the questionnaires via hyperlinks distributed during recruitment. On the survey website, a progress bar provided an overview on the percentage of survey completion. First, volunteers read an information letter and the consent form, which they had to agree upon in order to participate. The consent form was followed by the inclusion question, which identified whether participants are familiar with the term "body shaming." Afterwards, we assessed sociodemographic characteristics and social media involvement. Then, we presented the open-ended questions and participants could agree or disagree in a quantified format (*agree/disagree*) and/or state their own opinions in more detail. They were further asked to add missing information to the definitions. At the end, participants were debriefed and they had the opportunity to provide feedback on our study. Overall, the study took approximately 15 to 20 min.

Data Analysis

From the total participation sample ($N = 27$), two persons were excluded, because they were not familiar with the term "body shaming." The final analysis sample for the study consisted of 25 persons. The exploratory qualitative data analysis procedure was based on the Grounded Theory approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1996). Data were coded by CS (trained MSc psychologist and psychotherapist in training), and analyses were supervised by GK and JS (both PhD psychologists; GK is an experienced researcher in social psychology with expertise in qualitative research on (cyber-)bullying and health promotion; JS is a professor for health psychology and research methods with expertise in body image research and online studies). To increase objectivity, a local methodological expert in qualitative research methods, mixed methods, and research on social stigma and its effects, who was not otherwise involved in the research project, additionally reviewed the data coding.

Themes were derived from the data by using open coding (i.e., segmenting the phrases by potential categories), followed by axial coding (i.e., linking the categories) and selective coding (i.e., finding core concepts that describe the phenomenon). Results of this process were compiled by creating three mind-maps: One for the participants' initial understanding of body shaming, one for connections to the related constructs, and the last one for opinions on our suggested definition of body shaming . Additionally, we analyzed the frequencies of mentions and terms. For this purpose, we used *Wordle* Version 0.2 (www.wordle.net/) to create word clouds. Lastly, we calculated the percentages of agreement and disagreement regarding the similarity with the three other related constructs in social aggression research (AT, trolling, cyberbullying).

Results

Sample Characteristics

The final sample consisted of 15 women (60%) ranging from 22 to 57 years ($M_{age} = 29$ years, $SD_{age} = 9.5$ years), and 10 men (40%) ranging from 24 to 63 years ($M_{age} = 35$ years, $SD_{age} = 14.1$ years). Table 1 shows additional sociodemographic data.

Initial Understanding of Body Shaming

We identified themes that substantially covered the initial understanding of body shaming in our sample. In general, there were no obvious age or gender differences in the answers.

A large number of participants referred to *the perpetrator's behavior* in order to describe body shaming. A majority stated that the perpetrator was another person who behaves negatively toward the victim's body. "Body shaming for me is that someone else judges my body negatively. Or that people evaluate other people's bodies negatively due to outward appearances." (Participant 19; P19). Participants mainly used the terms "negative," "insult," and "ashamed" with regard to the body. For example, one participant stated that body shaming included "Insults based on appearance,
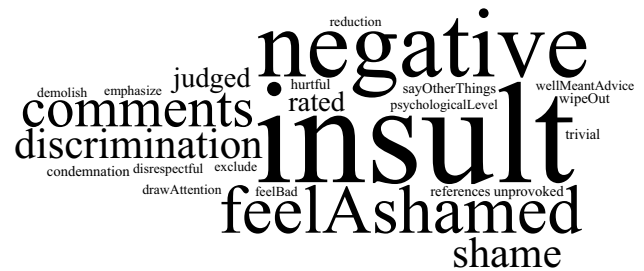
Fig. 1 Word cloud of frequent terms participants used to describe body shaming. In order to standardize different German terms with similar meanings, we adapted them during the process of translation (e.g., "insulting someone" was transformed into "insult"). The larger and the broader the words, the more frequently they were mentioned. Frequencies were as follows: insult, $n=10$; negative, $n=7$; feelAshamed (*having feelings of shame in the role as a victim*), $n=5$; comments, $n=4$; shame (*inducing shame as perpetrator*), $n=3$; discrimination, $n=3$; judged, $n=2$; rated, $n=2$; all others, $n=1$

i.e. related to the body" (P16). Essentially, most participants suggested that body shaming comments could manifest in negative allusions or evaluations, judgments and convictions, discrimination, emphasis, or even falsehoods about the victim's body. Figure 1 shows the frequencies of the main terms to describe body shaming.

One person had a deviating understanding and assumed that body shaming was: "the setting in scene of a person's physical appearance as an evaluation criterion, e.g.,

Table 1 Sociodemographic characteristics

Variable	Frequency	
	Absolute (n)	Percentage (%)
First language		
German	23	92
Other	2	8
Nationality		
German	20	80
Other	5	20
Employment status		
Employed	9	36
Self-employed	2	8
Housewife	1	4
Student	10	40
Trainee	2	8
Other	1	4
Educational achievement		
Abitur/A-levels	7	28
Bachelor's degree	9	36
Master's degree	5	20
Diploma	3	12
Advanced technical college certificate	1	4

The frequency refers to the proportion of persons measured in the sample size of $n = 25$

musculature, hairstyle, sexiness…" (P15). However, the majority of the participants stated that in body shaming, victims were shamed or negatively commented (i.e., expressed through insults) due to their body, appearance, or outer looks. Figure 2 displays a detailed presentation of the mentioned *specific target areas of body shaming*.

A few participants wrote about *triggers to engage in body shaming*. Some mentioned the victim's deviation from the norm/perfect beauty ideal. "For me, body shaming is if a person is socially excluded or disadvantaged by third persons because the body shape deviates from the norm" (P6). In addition, too many retouched pictures and the imitation of unhealthy role models for one's own body were mentioned as triggers (P8).

Some participants wrote about *the consequences of body shaming*. They addressed negative feelings that might arise in the victim: "Insulting other people on the basis of physical aspects (e.g., weight, shape, skin, (non-)existing blemishes) or saying anything else that causes the person to feel bad" (P12). Some participants mentioned aspects related to a decrease in the victim's self-esteem: "E.g., not uploading unedited photos because you don't find yourself looking good enough on them or because you notice body-related defects" (P3). In addition, participants named exclusion and stigmatization as consequences of body shaming.

A few participants described *the relationship between victim and perpetrator*. The majority said that the perpetrator was another person. Some people even assumed that victims would not necessarily know the perpetrator: "People are reduced to their appearance and their body is insulted. Although one does not know this person at all." (P14). A few people stated that the initiator of body shaming could be the person him- or herself: "Being ashamed of one's own body, negatively evaluating the qualities of one's own body" (P25).

According to the participants, *the nature of the body shaming comments* appears diverse. Their statements ranged from well-intentioned advice to trivial, unprovoked comments/special emphasis to negative (e.g., disrespectful,

malicious, hurtful) body-related comments. This might indicate that the phenomenon of body shaming could be dimensional and multifaceted. P5 stated, "The motives for these comments can also be rather trivial or even well-intentioned advice." Still, it is to mention that the majority understood body shaming comments as solely negative. Besides, the way body shaming comments are delivered seems multifaceted. P22 explained: "The insults can be communicated verbally, in writing as well as through gestures and facial expressions."

Some participants mentioned the *classification and differentiation* from the concept of bullying. There were disagreements: Some participants saw body shaming as a new, specific form of bullying that is reduced to outward appearances: "Negative references to the appearance of other people. A special kind of "bullying."" (P10). One participant (P20) perceived the body-related criterion as a differentiation from bullying. Another participant (P22) noted as a distinction that body shaming would not express itself in physical violence but on a psychological level.

A few people addressed the *development of body shaming*. The majority agreed and indicated that body shaming evolved through social media: "Body Shaming seems to have developed with social media" (P8).

Relations with Other Concepts

The majority of participants (65%) saw *similarities among AT and body shaming*. Mainly, participants stated that in both forms, the victims would be harmed or disparaged due to the negative, body-related comments. Still, other participants claimed *differences between AT and body shaming*. First, some mentioned that body shaming was more specifically regarding the body, but not clothes or other changeable characteristics of the appearance. Other participants claimed that the constructs would differ regarding the frequency of occurrence, with body shaming occurring as an unrepeated act. The majority of the participants stated that body shaming could also take place online, while AT was mainly understood as an offline-phenomenon and would therefore be characterized by verbal rather than written commentary. Participants were ambivalent regarding the severity, negative consequences, and intent to harm related AT and body shaming.

The perspectives on the relationship between cyberbullying and body shaming varied among our participants. Only 33% of the participants endorsed similarities, while the majority saw *differences between cyberbullying and body shaming*. A common argument for the difference was that the negative comments in cyberbullying were less specific and not solely related to the body. Additionally, many participants referred to different locations where both phenomena would usually occur. Mainly, they said that body

Fig. 2 Word cloud of frequent target areas in body shaming that were described by our participants. In order to standardize similar terms, we merged them together (e.g., "outer appearance" was transformed into "appearance"). The larger and the broader the words, the more frequently they were mentioned. Frequencies were as follows: body, $n = 23$; appearance, $n = 12$; size, $n = 2$; weight, $n = 2$; all others, $n = 1$

shaming was not restricted to the online environment or the execution by electronic means while cyberbullying was. Many participants also saw differences concerning the duration of the acts. They mentioned that cyberbullying was temporally longer and repeated, whereas body shaming was not. Some participants stated that when body shaming recurs, it would evolve to cyberbullying. Some participants also contrasted the severity of both acts with the tendency to say that cyberbullying was more violent, intentional, and direct than body shaming. Nevertheless, participants also mentioned *similarities among cyberbullying and body shaming*. In both cases, people would not need a face-to-face contact to carry out the behavior due to the use of electronic media. A few participants perceived the constructs as similar due to bullying behaviors, which involve aggression toward the victim.

Only 36% of the participants endorsed similarities among trolling and body shaming, while the majority defined the two concepts as different from one another. Many participants stated that trolling was more global (not just body-related) and without apparent intention. Another frequently stated differentiation was the location of occurrence, seeing trolling as a pure online phenomenon, while body shaming could also take place offline. Some persons felt trolling as being more severe than body shaming: "However, I think that trolling involves rather "harsher" body shaming comments" (P5).

Other participants pointed out *similarities among trolling and body shaming*. For some participants, trolling was an umbrella term with body shaming as a subcategory of trolling. However, trolling was characterized as more destructive because of a more severe intention to harm, hurt, or humiliate a victim.

Figure 3 provides an overview of the perceived degree of similarities to or differences between the respective constructs and body shaming. Appendix 2 provides an overview on the exemplary statements regarding similarities and differences of the concepts.

Opinions on our Suggested Definition of Body Shaming

The majority of the participants (75%, $n = 18$) agreed with our proposed definition. One participant did not answer this question. Some participants (17%, $n = 4$) mentioned that they would add aspects to our definition. Mostly, they said that body shaming could also be a repeated act. One participant proposed to add a facet of subjective perceptions of commentary as negative. Two participants disagreed with the definition (8%). Here, the aspect of well-intentioned advice was seen as critical. Another person suggested including the dimensional nature of the phenomena (ranging from "well-intentioned advice" to "malicious comments"). One participant expressed a different understanding of body shaming, which would be more of presenting one's positive body aspects.

Discussion

In this exploratory study, we examined people's understanding of body shaming to develop a scientific definition and distinguish this phenomenon from other related constructs. To our knowledge, this was the first study to investigate these aspects of body shaming in an empirical study.

As we asked for the initial understanding of body shaming, the majority of participants agreed that body shaming refers to negative body-related comments, mostly in the form of insults. These verbal or written offenses mostly take place online, but they can also occur in real life. Additionally, participants felt that the severity of comments could vary from well-intended to harmful. Most participants agreed that
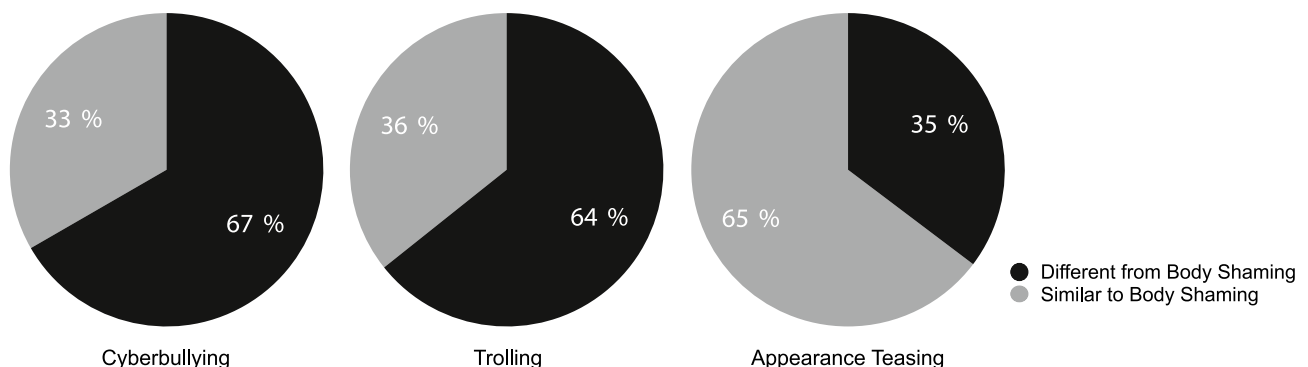
Fig. 3 Perceived (dis)similarity of body shaming and related constructs. Cyberbullying contained $n = 25$ statements; trolling, $n = 24$ statements; appearance teasing, $n = 25$ statements

body shaming has negative consequences for the victim, for example, bad feelings, impairments in self-esteem as well as social exclusion and stigmatization. Taken together, our participants' initial understanding of body shaming largely overlapped with our proposed definition. Therefore, most of them agreed with it.

However, some people noted that body shaming could also be a repeated act and that body shaming comments' victims must perceive comments as negative. Only a small number of participants disagreed with our proposed definition. Most of them said well-intentioned advice was not part of body shaming. Another suggestion was to add the term "dimension," which would indicate that body shaming ranges from well-intentioned advice to harmful insults.

Another aim of our study was to distinguish body shaming from related constructs (i.e., AT, cyberbullying, and trolling). Of all presented constructs, AT was perceived as most similar to body shaming. In both concepts, negative appearance-related comments harm or disparage the victim subjectively. Participants assumed that both activities influence the body image of the victim. This would be in line with the finding that at least AT was already found to be related to body dissatisfaction (Menzel et al., 2010; Neumark-Sztainer & Haines, 2004; Thompson et al., 1999). Most of the findings confirm former assumptions about potential differences between both phenomena. Participants felt that body shaming was more body-specific than AT, and that it would not necessarily need to be a repeated act. Additionally, participants mentioned that body shaming could also take place online. Therefore, it is not restricted to negative *verbal* commentary like AT (Furman & Thompson, 2002). Interestingly, some participants assumed that body shaming would equal AT occurring online.

Still it is not resolved, which of the concepts is *more severe* and whether body shaming is *intentional or not*. Both aspects seem to depend on which point of the dimension—reaching from "well-intentioned to malicious"—the body shaming comments (or AT) take place. As in AT, we assumed that body shaming comments could also imply (less severe) well-mentioned advice without the intention to harm the victim. In the end, the subjective interpretation of the situation might be essential in determining whether (and to which degree) a person feels offended by a comment or not. In sum, we deduce that body shaming displays many similarities with AT and might therefore be a body-specific subtype of AT that evolved through social media.

As main similarities among body shaming and cyberbullying, participants pointed out that both constructs might be subtypes of social aggression. They assumed that body shaming is a subtype of cyberbullying, which would make it a form of bullying. Bullying is a form of social aggression that is (among other things) "characterized by an imbalance of power" (Olweus, 1999; p.11) between perpetrator and victim. This imbalance of power is present in both, cyberbullying and body shaming: targets cannot defend themselves easily and the anonymity of the online environment makes it easier for perpetrators to express negative remarks (Price & Dalgleish, 2010). Being expressed online, those insults are ubiquitous and accessible to a large audience, resulting in a massive humiliation of the victim (Norman, 2020).

One difference between cyberbullying and body shaming was that the negative comments in body shaming are more specific than in cyberbullying. This is in line with the finding that cyberbullying targets more than just body parts (e.g., Cassidy et al., 2009). A second difference was that cyberbullying only takes place online and is executed with electronic tools like smartphones (Patchin & Hinduja, 2006). According to many of our participants, body shaming can also occur in real-life interactions. A third potential difference was that cyberbullying is temporally longer and repeated (Smith et al., 2008). However, among the participants, opinions varied, whether body shaming is an unrepeated act or not. We argue that if the *same* perpetrator attacks the *same* victim with negative, body-related online comments over and over again, body shaming could be classified as a specific form of cyberbullying as it would then match the definition of cyberbullying in terms of the behaviors' duration and frequency (Price & Dalgleish, 2010; Smith et al., 2008). Therefore, we would suggest that if (online) body shaming recurs (initiated by the same perpetrator), it can evolve to a form of cyberbullying. This is in line with the fourth mentioned difference, the severity. Additionally, according to our findings, there does not need to be a personal relationship between perpetrator and victim in body shaming. This difference in the proximity of the relationship could account for our participants' view that body shaming may be less severe for the target than cyberbullying. In sum, we would propose that there is a relationship between body shaming and cyberbullying. We assume that (online) body shaming is a precursor of (cyber-)bullying.

The last construct we wanted to differentiate from body shaming was trolling. One difference concerned the specificity of both constructs: Trolling was perceived as more global, whereas body shaming was considered more body-specific. This is in line with previous findings (Lumsden & Morgan, 2017), where researchers claimed trolling as an umbrella term for phenomena like body shaming, rape or death threats. However, our findings indicate a need for adjustments of this classification. First, trolling is a mere online phenomenon (Lumsden & Morgan, 2017), whereas our findings suggest that body shaming can also take place offline. Second, trolling is described as an act without apparent intention (Buckels et al., 2014), which is not necessarily the case in body shaming. Third, in our investigation, persons felt that trolls would use their victims to provoke an answer. Thus, the victims are just a means to an end. These

motives might be different in body shaming. Nevertheless, both concepts can include destructive behaviors that judge or humiliate victims. In sum, we suggest that body shaming is not a subtype of trolling, but rather a tool or a tactic for the troll to provoke answers.

Taking all findings into account, we would define body shaming as follows:

Body Shaming is an unrepeated act in which a person expresses unsolicited, mostly negative opinions or comments about the target's body (e.g., size, shape, weight, body parts, body-related appearance, extremities, etc.). The perpetrator does not necessarily intend to harm the target, but the targeted person *perceives* the comment as negative, offensive or body shame inducing. Therefore, body shaming can range from well-meant advice (e.g., medically-based advice from a friend: "You should reduce your weight to prevent high blood pressure") to malevolent insults (e.g., from an unknown social media follower "Your legs look nasty"). Body Shaming can take place in both, social media and the real world.

We decided not to implement all suggestions of our participants. First, we still see body shaming as a non-repeated act, because otherwise it would hardly be distinguishable from facets of (cyber-)bullying. In addition, we think that body shaming is in general not self-directed. We would describe such self-directed commentaries as body *shame*. Body shame is when people perceive their bodies as unattractive or undesirable and they experience their body as the source of "self-shame" (Gilbert, 2002), which is a self-directed form of body criticism.

We would classify body shaming as follows:

Body shaming is a form of social aggression. It is a body-specific subtype of appearance teasing, often occurring online. Body shaming is an umbrella term for other, more specific concepts such as fat-shaming, thin/skinny-shaming, etc. When intentional, malevolent forms of (online) body shaming are repeatedly expressed by the same perpetrator(s), body shaming turns into a form of cyberbullying. In the context of trolling, (online) body shaming can also be a tactic/tool for trolls to provoke answers of the victim.

The findings of our investigation help to gather insights into this new phenomenon that evolved through social media. By constructing a valid, scientifically examined definition, which distinguishes body shaming from related constructs, we have created a basis for further research.

Experimental research on the effects of body shaming on mood and body satisfaction can constitute a possible next step in identifying the clinical relevance of body shaming for these phenomena. Additionally, our findings are a starting point for further discussions, for instance, on the content validity of body shaming or on potential motives and traits of perpetrators and victims. Nevertheless, our findings should be interpreted in the light of the following limitations.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

One limitation lies in the relatively small sample size, which might not allow the generalization of findings or the assumptions of data saturation. It is worth noting that sample sizes in exploratory research with a qualitative approach are smaller compared to quantitative research so that our sample size is no exception. According to Thomson (2010), the average sample size in qualitative studies that use a Grounded Theory approach is 25, which is consistent with our sample size. However, the author recommends sample sizes of 30 participants/interviews, in order to reach data saturation. As we had to finish our data collection within a limited timeframe, we could not meet this criterion. Nevertheless, we already found repetitions in our answers within each category which indicates that we have approached data saturation. However, it would be interesting to replicate our study with a larger sample. Although our sample covered a wide age-range of the general population, it stems from Western industrialized countries. Thus, it would be interesting to replicate this study in different cultural settings. It is assumed that body shaming is present in a variety of cultures (Thuo, 2016), but it has not yet been examined if people from different backgrounds understand the same by this term. As recent studies about body shaming were frequently conducted in or published by researchers from Asian countries (e.g., Micheal & Azeharie, 2020; Novitasari & Hamid, 2021, Sugiati, 2019), it is relevant to test our proposed definition internationally. To our best knowledge, no studies from other cultural backgrounds have been published in order to define the construct of body shaming, so this might be a topic for future studies. Also, it might be intriguing to examine, whether there are (cultural) differences in gender, age, or sexual orientation regarding body shaming.

Although we did not find significant gender differences regarding the *understanding* of body shaming, future studies might target potential gender differences in the *effects* of body shaming. For example, according to the *objectification theory* (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997), body shaming might especially trigger objectification processes which in turn heighten the risks of mental health issues in women (e.g., unipolar depression, eating disorders). With regard to this important and influential theory, future studies should also try to analyze the influence of body shaming on potentially gender-specific self-objectification processes and their influence on self-concept and self-esteem.

The second limitation refers to the subjective nature of qualitative data analysis. In our case, only one researcher coded the data. Despite of supervision and reviews, further triangulation would be beneficial to ensure quality (Flick, 2009; Hansen, 2006) by increasing objectivity and calculating interrater reliability. It is advisable that other (uninvolved) parties code the dataset. Additionally, future studies

could use other qualitative methodologies than Grounded Theory to get further insights from new perspectives.

Despite these suggestions for future research, our study was a first step to define body shaming and distinguish it from related constructs. This forges a path for future research in the field of body shaming and its impact on psychological parameters.

Implications for Practice

The present outline of the construct of body shaming can help to sensitize practitioners in bullying and cyberbullying prevention for this phenomenon. It can provide them with a clear definition and classification as a starting point to assess the frequency of body shaming in their area of work and develop specific interventions for this precursor of cyberbullying. On the one hand, they can assess the real impact of body shaming on mental health and the concordance with known effects of other forms of bullying, such as symptoms of anxiety, depression (Romano et al., 2020), emotional problems, and thoughts of self-harm (Bryson et al., 2020). On the other hand, eating or affective disorders might be particularly important to focus on because these disorders (or potential vulnerability factors) were found to be associated with AT (e.g., Eisenberg et al., 2003; Meier & Gray, 2014; Menzel et al., 2010) and social media use (Mills et al., 2018; Prichard et al., 2018).

Altogether, we think that body shaming awareness campaigns and early interventions (e.g., regarding social media commentary) in case of observed occasions of body shaming might be important tasks for cyberbullying prevention practitioners to prevent negative mental health effects and the development of single body shaming occasions into (cyber) bullying.

Declarations

Conflict of Interest The authors declare no competing interests.

Appendix 1. Open-ended questions to gain insights in people's understanding of body shaming

Q1	What do you understand by body shaming? (e.g., Which aspects belong to body shaming? What is body shaming different from?)
Q2	Below you can see the definition of *cyberbullying*. Please read the definition carefully. Do you think body shaming and cyberbullying are the same (if so, why? What are similarities)? Or does body shaming differ from cyberbullying (if so, what are the differences)? Please justify your answer *Definition cyberbullying:* *Cyberbullying is defined as an aggressive, deliberate act carried out by an individual or a group, using electronic sources, frequently repeated over time against a victim who is not able to defend him- or herself easily. The electronic forms of contact can be smartphones, e-mails, chat rooms, and online spaces like, e.g., Facebook*
Q3	Below you can see the definition of *trolling*. Please read the definition carefully. Do you think body shaming and trolling are the same (if so, why? What are similarities)? Or does body shaming differ from trolling (if so, what are the differences)? Please justify your answer *Definition trolling:* *Trolling is a form of online abuse. It describes acts, in which groups or individuals post offensive messages and behave in a delusive, destructive, or dismissive way in a social setting on the Internet without apparent intention*
Q4	Below you can see the definition of *appearance teasing*. Please read the definition carefully. Do you think body shaming and appearance teasing are the same (if so, why? What are similarities)? Or does body shaming differ from appearance teasing (if so, what are the differences)? Please justify your answer *Definition appearance teasing:* *Appearance Teasing manifests in negative social feedback/negative verbal commentary on individual's physical characteristics, e.g., weight, facial features, or hair. It can range from relatively good-natured comments from a close friend to malevolent expressions from strangers or bullies. Appearance teasing is a repeated act which often intents to harm the target*
Q5	Below is our suggested definition of *body shaming*. Please read this carefully as well. Would you agree with this definition or is something relevant missing? *Definition body shaming:* *Body shaming is an unrepeated action in which a person expresses unsolicited, mostly negative opinions or comments about the target's body, which can take place in both, social media and in the real world. As the term body shaming suggests, a reference to the appearance or to the body of the target is central. Body shaming does not necessarily intend to harm the victim. It may also be a well-meant advice (e.g., from a physician: "You should reduce your weight to prevent high blood pressure"). In contrast to fat shaming (i.e., mockery or criticism about someone judged to be fat or overweight), body shaming does not solely target overweight individuals. E.g., lean individuals or specific body parts can also fall victim to body shaming (e.g., "You need some meat on your bones," "How is the view down there, shorty?," "Your legs look nasty," "Your ears seem small")*

Q2-Q4 (bold print) were presented in randomized order to avoid effects caused by sequence and/or order. To prevent later editing of statements, participants could not return to previous questions

Appendix 2. Overview on exemplary statements regarding similarities and differences of the targeted concepts (body shaming, appearance teasing, cyberbullying, trolling)

Body shaming and appearance teasing

Stated similarities among body shaming and appearance teasing (most participants agreed to the similarities without further feedback):
- "Yes, the two constructs are similar because the victim is harmed due to his appearance" (P17)
- "Appearance Teasing is very similar to Body Shaming, it possibly describes the same construct, because it deals with malicious comments about body characteristics" (P12)
- "Appearance Teasing and Body Shaming are, in my opinion, very comparable, since one's own opinion gets influenced by the opinion of others." (P25)

Single stated differences between body shaming and appearance teasing:
- "If comments refer to the body of the "victim" and not to their clothes, accessories, etc. it [appearance teasing] would be body shaming to me" (P6)
- "I would say that body shaming doesn't have to be a repeated act" (P21)
- "Moreover, this definition does not explicitly state that appearance teasing also occurs online. Body Shaming does that in any case" (P5)
- "[…] Body Shaming = in the Internet. Appearance Teasing = telling the person directly in the face" (P9)
- "Apparently, appearance teasing only refers to "verbal" comments. Body shaming is often present in social media, that's where people write…" (P5)
- "[…] it [body shaming] can also be executed via personal/subjective comments that are related to oneself." (P21)

"To me, however, Body Shaming is a stronger form of Appearance Teasing, because in my eyes "good-natured comments of a friend" do not belong to it" (P22)
- "In my opinion Appearance Teasing is even more malicious than Body Shaming, because Body Shaming is rather about situational insults whereas Appearance Teasing is about to really harm the victim" (P20)
- Both constructs "cannot be equated, because body shaming does not aim to harm the victim, it rather comments negatively on the appearance" (P13)
- "Body shaming consciously aims at harming the other with comments regarding the body" (P1)

Body shaming and cyberbullying

Stated similarities among body shaming and cyberbullying:
- "In both cases, people do not say their opinion to their counterpart's face. By using the electronic media/ "anonymity" of the Internet people feel strong, people get hurt and they don't see each other's emotions" (P14)
- "[…] the victim cannot easily defend him-/herself. According to blog posts it seems difficult for victims to show the right reaction (defense), e.g. ignoring vs. giving in vs. starting a shitstorm, etc." (P5)
- "In both cases the victims are attacked because of their appearance, origin or any kind of diversity" (P8)
- "I consider them both as subordinates of social aggression which makes them indirectly related" (P2)
- "Body Shaming is a subtype of cyberbullying" (P1)

Stated differences between body shaming and cyberbullying:
- "Cyberbullying can be used more universally (not just the body as a target)" (P10)
- "Assuming that cyberbullying exists, it primarily refers to the virtual space, since electronic means must be used to launch an attack at all. Body shaming does not require any electronic devices" (P6)
- "In my understanding, body shaming is more situational and less repetitive and intentional" (P20)
- "If body shaming occurs several times in a row, it's cyberbullying" (P9)
- "[…] body shaming can be more subliminal. By cyberbullying I understand direct insults and "screwing somebody up" (often also collectively)" (P3)

Body shaming and trolling

Stated similarities among body shaming and trolling:
- "body shaming is a subcategory of trolling" (P2)
- "I think trolling might involve body shaming. Because here, others are also judged in a dismissive way" (P11)
- "Similarities seem to exist, because the aim, namely humiliating the other person, is the same" (P24)

Stated differences between body shaming and trolling:
- "Different, because [trolling is] not necessarily related to the body. It is also very random" (P16)
- "Trolling is different, because it only takes place online. Body shaming can also take place face to face" (P12)
- "Trolling is designed to provoke an answer, hoping to get a more pleasant answer for the troll. The allegedly trolled person doesn't even have to be the actual target, but a means to an end. However, a troll can use body shaming when it suits his tactics." (P6)
- "In trolling, more "traps" are be set for the victim." (P4)
- "However, I think that trolling involves rather "harsher" body shaming comments" (P5)

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