

The Judged Body: Emotions, Embodied Cognition, and Educational Contexts of Body Shaming

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Abstract: This contribution presents the results of a study that explored body shaming as an embodied experience capable of involving, at the same time, bodily dimension, emotional regulation, cognitive processes, and identity construction within educational and relational contexts. The research – from an interdisciplinary psycho-pedagogical perspective – was conducted through an online questionnaire administered to a sample of 1,014 persons, 58% of participants reported having experienced episodes of body shaming. The contribution will focus on the emotional reactions associated with episodes of body shaming, measured through a Likert scale structured around 11 emotions. The results show a predominance of experiences connected to humiliation, shame, sadness, and devaluation of the bodily self, highlighting how judgment directed at the body acts not only on the relational level, but also on processes of emotional self-regulation, social participation, and engagement within learning contexts. From an embodied perspective, body shaming emerges as a practice of social normativity that transforms the body into a device of symbolic and cognitive control, influencing the way students inhabit educational spaces, perceive themselves, and construct their own presence within learning processes. The findings suggest the need to design emotionally safe, multimodal, and inclusive educational environments capable of integrating body, emotion, and learning within a transformative psycho-pedagogical perspective.

Keywords: Embodied Education; body shaming; embodied emotions; situated learning



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1. Introduction

In recent years, body shaming has attracted increasing scholarly attention across a wide range of disciplines as one of the most pervasive forms of interpersonal stigmatization, identity marginalization, and verbal abuse within educational, relational, and digital contexts (Borgna *et al.*, 2025; Occhini *et al.*, 2026). Through comments, mockery, judgments, and exclusionary practices targeting physical appearance, body shaming contributes to the construction of negative body representations, affecting psychological well-being, self-esteem, and social participation among those involved (Schlüter *et al.*, 2023). Although the literature has extensively documented the consequences of body shaming for mental health

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(Cerolini *et al.*, 2024), less attention has been devoted to the ways in which the emotions generated by such experiences contribute to redefining individuals' relationships with their bodies and how this interrelationship may influence motivation and learning processes. In this regard, the perspectives of embodied cognition and embodied learning appear particularly challenging and promising for contemporary scientific research (Ruebottom & Toubiana, 2024).

From a psycho-pedagogical perspective, the present contribution aims to explore the emotional reactions associated with experiences of body shaming, considering emotions not merely as psychological outcomes of the phenomenon but as processes that influence identity construction, social participation, and the ways individuals inhabit educational environments. The guiding assumption of this study is that judgments directed at the body generate emotional configurations capable of affecting self-regulation processes, forms of social presence, and learning opportunities, in line with recent developments in the field of embodied emotion (Niedenthal *et al.*, 2024; Cabbai *et al.*, 2026).

Drawing on data collected from a survey involving 1,014 participants, this study examines the emotions associated with experiences of body shaming and discusses the findings from an embodied perspective. The aim is to understand how a body subjected to denigration and judgment through processes of cultural and aesthetic regulation may gradually become a body that limits its own presence within relational and educational contexts. At the same time, the study seeks to identify possible strategies for fostering inclusive environments capable of valuing diversity, plurality, and bodily particularities, as well as the different ways in which bodies inhabit physical, social, and relational spaces.

2. Materials and Methods

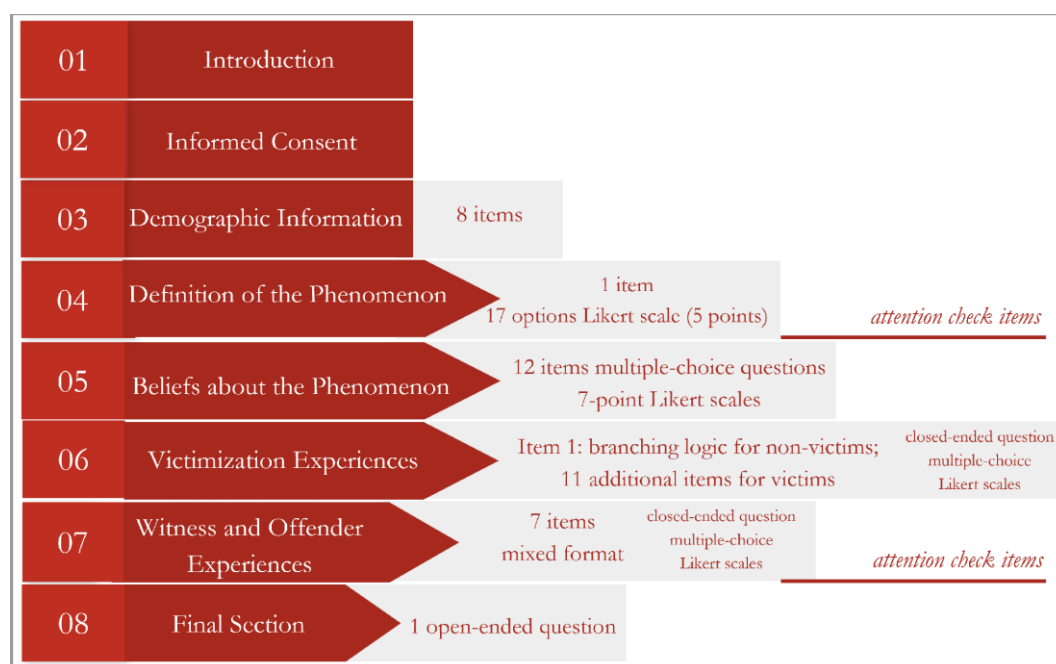
This study draws on a broader research project investigating body shaming as a relational, emotional, and embodied experience. The study was designed to explore the ways in which negative judgments about the body are associated with specific emotional configurations and forms of psychological distress that affect social participation and identity construction processes.

Data were collected through a self-administered online questionnaire distributed between 2021 and 2024 via Google Forms. The use of a digitally mediated survey was considered particularly appropriate for investigating personal and potentially stigmatizing experiences, as it facilitates *participants' disclosure*, reduces the effects of social desirability bias that frequently characterize the assessment of emotionally sensitive experiences (Reips, 2021), and substantially attenuates distortions associated with the *good-subject* and *Hawthorne effects* (Hwang, 2023). The study falls within the tradition of exploratory survey research and adopts a descriptive approach aimed at reconstructing the emotions associated with body shaming experiences and the principal forms of distress reported by victims.

2.1. Instrument

The questionnaire consisted of eight sections and included closed-ended questions, multiple-choice responses, Likert scales, and open-ended items, organized in a progressive structure aimed at exploring both representations of the phenomenon and participants' psychological experiences.

Figure 1. Overall structure of the questionnaire



Following an introductory section and informed consent, the questionnaire collected participants' sociodemographic information. Subsequent sections focused on definitions of and beliefs about body shaming through items designed to explore representations associated with body-related judgment. The core of the instrument consisted of the victimization section. Through branching logic, participants who reported having experienced body shaming were directed to a dedicated section exploring contexts, characteristics of the experience, associated emotions, and perceived consequences.

Emotional reactions were assessed using a Likert scale measuring perceived intensity (0 = not experienced; 5 = intensely experienced) across eleven emotions (see Figure 2).

A specific section was devoted to experiences reported as witnesses or perpetrators of body shaming episodes. The questionnaire concluded with an open-ended question designed to collect observations, reflections, and narratives not captured by the structured items. The instrument also included two attention-check items aimed at detecting survey fatigue and unreliable responses.

2.2. Procedure and Sample Characteristics

Participation in the study was voluntary and anonymous. Participants were recruited through a non-probability snowball sampling procedure using social networking platforms and instant messaging applications. A total of 1,046 questionnaires were collected. Following data quality control procedures, the final sample consisted of 1,014 participants. The sample was composed predominantly of women (81%), with smaller proportions of men (17%) and non-cisgender individuals (2%). From a demographic perspective, the most represented age group was 19–24 years (380 participants; 37.5% of the total sample).

The analyses presented in this contribution focus on the emotions associated with body shaming experiences and on the principal forms of psychological distress reported by participants. Particular attention was devoted to the 16–24 age group, a developmental stage characterized by heightened exposure to social comparison processes, identity construction, and body image formation. The findings were interpreted through the lens of embodied emotion, considering emotions not only as individual psychological states but also as processes through which the body becomes a site of experience, regulation, and social participation.

2.3. Instrumental Limitations and Study Constraints

The findings of this study should be interpreted considering someone methodological limitations. First, the use of non-probability snowball sampling and the dissemination of the survey through pre-existing social networks introduce potential self-selection biases. Individuals who were more sensitive to the topic or more willing to share personal experiences of body shaming may have been more likely to participate.

A second limitation concerns the composition of the sample. The strong predominance of young adults and female participants restricts the extent to which the findings can be generalized to the broader population. Similarly, the limited number of non-cisgender participants requires caution when interpreting findings related to this subgroup, which would benefit from specifically designed sampling strategies in future research.

A further limitation concerns age distribution. Although this characteristic enabled an in-depth exploration of the experiences of young people aged 16–24 years, adult and older age groups were comparatively underrepresented. In particular, ageism and forms of body shaming associated with ageing warrant further investigation through studies specifically targeting adult and older populations.

These limitations do not undermine the exploratory value of the study; rather, they define the scope within which the findings should be interpreted.

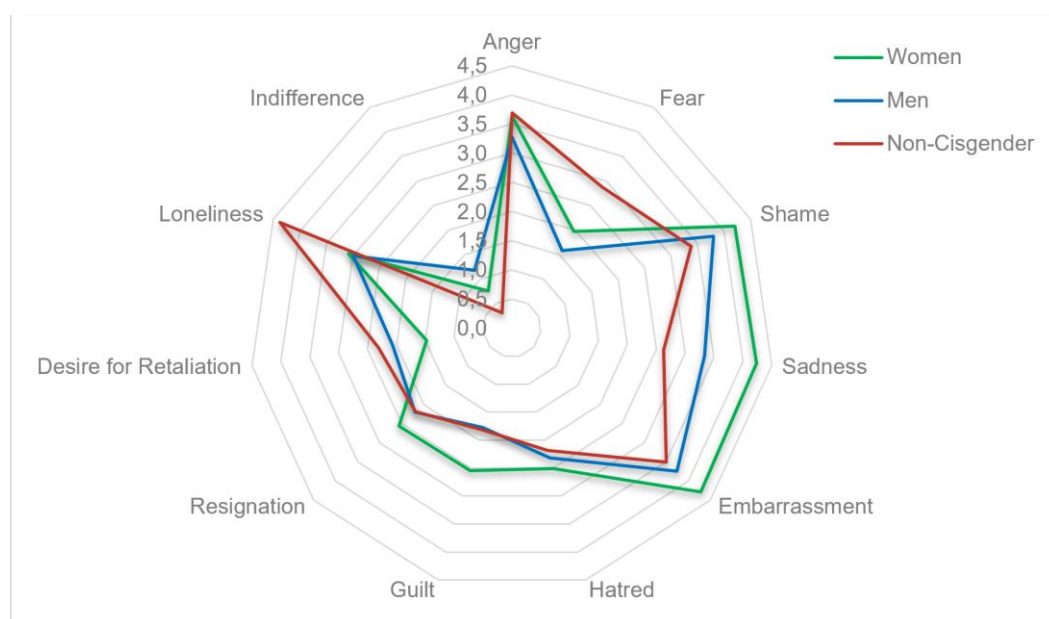
3. Results: embodied emotions

587 persons (57.9% of the total sample) reported having experienced at least one episode of body shaming during their lifetime. Analyses were conducted on this subsample to examine the emotional experiences associated with victimization and

to reconstruct the affective profile related to such experiences, as well as the principal forms of psychological distress reported by participants.

3.1. The Emotional profile of victims

Figure 2. Emotional profiles associated with body shaming experiences among victims (intensity scale 0–5)



The emotions associated with body shaming episodes show a distribution strongly oriented toward the internalization of suffering. Shame, sadness, and embarrassment emerged as the most frequently reported emotional experiences, whereas emotions directed toward the externalization of conflict, such as anger, hatred, and desires for revenge, displayed substantially lower intensity levels.

These findings suggest that body shaming is experienced primarily as an attack on personal worth and self-image rather than as an event capable of generating reactions directed toward the offender. The centrality of shame appears particularly significant, as this emotion directly affects the relationship between the individual and the body, transforming a physical characteristic into something perceived as defective, inadequate, or socially undesirable.

In a previous study (Occhini *et al.*, 2026), the experiences of *humiliation* and *psychological pain* were examined in greater depth. Although these constructs were not included among the predefined emotions in the questionnaire, they emerged frequently within participants' open-ended responses. Psychological pain encompassed references to trauma, discouragement, emotional injury, distress, and feelings of being tormented. Together, humiliation and psychological pain contribute to delineating an emotional landscape characterized by devaluation, exclusion, loss of social recognition, withdrawal, and avoidance.

Importantly, the emotional impact of body shaming was not confined to isolated episodes of teasing or ridicule. Rather, it extended to the ways victims perceived and experienced their bodies over time, influencing everyday environments, social interactions, and spaces of participation.

3.2. Psychological Distress and Bodily Vulnerability Among Young People Aged 16–24 Years

In this contribution, particular attention was devoted to participants aged between 16 and 24 years. This subgroup consisted of 451 individuals, of whom 264 identified themselves as victims of body shaming (58.5% of the age group; 44.9% of all victims (n. 587); and 26% of the total sample (n. 1.014). The subgroup included 231 women, 27 men, and 6 non-cisgender participants, with a mean age of 20.8 years. In approximately 85% of cases, verbal aggression occurred within educational and/or sports-related settings.

The emotional profile observed in this subgroup did not substantially differ from that identified in the overall victim sample (see Figure 2). However, compared with older age groups, younger participants displayed a markedly higher prevalence of psychological distress and clinically relevant manifestations associated with victimization experiences. Although these conditions do not allow diagnostic inferences, they reveal a constellation of suffering that simultaneously involves bodily, emotional, and performance-related dimensions.

Anxiety, which was particularly frequent (approximately 74%), together with panic-related symptoms (approximately 63%), was often associated with situations involving bodily exposure and social evaluation. Participants' accounts suggested the presence of avoidance behaviours, discomfort with appearing in public, and fear of peer judgment. Eating disorders (32%) appeared to reflect attempts to modify or control a body perceived as inadequate in relation to socially prescribed standards.

Depressive symptoms also emerged as particularly relevant (approximately 60%). Within the sample, these symptoms were associated with reduced social participation, diminished motivation, and lower engagement in everyday activities.

Taken together, these findings suggest that the consequences of body shaming extend beyond emotional and relational dimensions, manifesting as forms of suffering deeply rooted in bodily experience.

The emotions and difficulties reported by victims appear to influence the ways individuals inhabit their bodies, interpret the gaze of others, and participate in social and educational contexts. Shame fosters a desire to hide; anxiety promotes avoidance and self-monitoring behaviours; eating disorders express attempts to correct the judged body; and depression is associated with a progressive reduction in personal presence and initiative.

From this perspective, the body becomes the site where social judgment is internalized and transformed into emotional experience, behaviour, and self-perception. The findings therefore suggest a form of embodied distress in which suffering is experienced through the body itself.

4. Discussion: The Body That Learns to Disappear

The findings presented above allow for a reflection that extends beyond a mere description of the emotions associated with body shaming. Shame, humiliation, sadness, and embarrassment do not emerge as isolated reactions confined to specific episodes of ridicule; rather, they appear as processes that shape the ways individuals perceive, experience, and use their bodies within relational and educational contexts. From this perspective, body shaming can be interpreted as a practice of social normativity that acts upon body image while directly influencing the ways individuals are present within social spaces.

The data suggest that the consequences of body shaming tend to organize themselves around three broad configurations of embodied distress. Anxiety, depression, and eating-related difficulties appear to share a common experiential core: the transformation of the body from a site of expression and participation into a site of control, limitation, and withdrawal. It is precisely this transformation that allows body shaming to be understood as a process through which the body gradually learns to reduce its presence in the world through three distinct modalities.

The first concerns **the body that hides**. Findings related to anxiety, shame, and embarrassment show that body-related judgment frequently generates avoidance behaviours and body surveillance, which may evolve into self-objectification, a process through which the individual internalizes the gaze of others (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). The critical issue lies not only in the verbal aggression itself but also in the gradual acquisition of an existential stance characterized by caution, reduced exposure, and a tendency toward invisibility. In many cases, the body ceases to function as a medium through which relationships are established and becomes instead something to be protected and shielded from judgment. The avoidance of social situations is particularly significant because it limits opportunities for learning, socialization, and identity development, ultimately forcing individuals to experience forms of marginalization and diminished participation.

A second configuration is represented by the **body that must be corrected**. Eating disorders – and, to a lesser extent, tendencies toward self-injurious behaviours and body modification practices – observed among younger participants suggest that the denigrated body is often perceived as something that can and should be altered in order to become less vulnerable to judgment. Here, suffering does not simply lead to withdrawal but motivates active intervention upon the body. The body becomes subjected to continuous practices of monitoring, regulation, and transformation aimed at reducing the perceived distance between oneself and socially normalized aesthetic standards. The issue is not merely body weight or physical appearance, but rather the symbolic meanings attached to these characteristics within processes of social recognition. The body thus becomes an ongoing project of hypothetical self-improvement and illusory adaptation. From an embodied perspective, individuals do not merely experience dissatisfaction with their appearance; they come to experience the body itself as an object that must be corrected in order to deserve acceptance, belonging, and social value (Occhini & Mancaniello, 2026).

The third modality is the **body that withdraws**. Depressive manifestations appear to represent a different response to body-related judgment. Unlike the body

that hides or the body that attempts to correct itself, the body that gives up no longer seeks to negotiate its relationship with social norms. Instead, it progressively reduces its presence in the world, withdraws investment from social relationships, and relinquishes the possibility of being recognized by others. This renunciation is not a conscious choice but rather the outcome of a process through which body-related judgment becomes internalized to the point of limiting opportunities for participation and engagement.

These three configurations should not be understood as rigid or mutually exclusive categories. Rather, the body that hides, the body that corrects itself, and the body that gives up represent different ways through which body shaming progressively restricts victims' social presence. The judged body gradually becomes a body that learns to disappear, losing its function as a tool for exploration, learning, and relational engagement.

From this perspective, perhaps the most significant finding of the present study lies in the possibility of interpreting body shaming as an implicit educational process. Every episode of ridicule conveys a normative message concerning which bodies are considered desirable, acceptable, or legitimate. Through repeated exposure to such messages, individuals learn not only how their bodies appear but, more importantly, what place they are allowed to occupy within the social world. The judged body thus becomes a disciplined body, one that modifies both its appearance and its behaviour in anticipation of the judgments of others.

5. Body shaming and embodied education

As we have seen, the 16–24 age group represents the population most involved in experiences of body shaming. At this developmental stage, the body assumes a central role in processes of identity construction, social belonging, and peer recognition, making body-related judgment particularly impactful at the emotional level. Adolescence constitutes an existential phase in which the individual is continually called upon to redefine the relationship with their own body, which becomes at once a site of biological transformation, symbolic construction, and relational mediation (Mancaniello, 2018). The adolescent body is not merely a biological reality to be inhabited, but a space through which the individual seeks recognition, expresses belonging, experiments with difference, and constructs their own presence in the world.

The results therefore confirm the value of an embodied reading of body shaming experiences. The emotions detected do not appear as simple internal states, but as embodied processes that orient behaviour, regulate social participation, and shape the relationship with one's own body. From this perspective, bodily experience cannot be separated from the cultural and relational contexts that produce it. Experiences of shame, exclusion, humiliation, or inadequacy generated by body shaming tend, in fact, to sediment within bodily memory and everyday practices, influencing self-perception, the sense of personal efficacy, and the possibilities for social participation (Merleau-Ponty, 1962; Fuchs, 2018).

This process appears particularly relevant in contemporary societies characterized by the increasing exposure of bodily space through digital media and

social networks. As Boyd (2014) has shown, digital environments amplify the visibility of bodies and render the possibility of judgment permanent, contributing to the transformation of the body into an object that is constantly observed, compared, and evaluated. Body shaming is thus configured as a form of verbal or symbolic aggression and, at the same time, as a social device that produces vulnerability through processes of bodily delegitimization and the reduction of personal worth to physical appearance.

To understand body shaming, then, means to understand the way in which social judgment becomes embodied within subjectivity and contributes to defining individuals' possibilities for action, learning, and belonging. From this perspective emerges the pedagogical value of embodied education, understood as an approach that recognizes the body as a fundamental dimension of educational experience and of the construction of the self (Shapiro, 2015). Educating toward a welcoming relationship becomes a necessity in order to promote processes of awareness, acceptance, and recognition capable of restoring legitimacy to the different expressions of the body. Educational contexts can thus be configured as spaces of symbolic reappropriation of the body, in which adolescents may develop positive forms of bodily agency, counter stigmatizing narratives, and build relationships grounded in mutual respect, the valuing of difference, and the dignity of the person. From this perspective, countering body shaming represents not only an objective of distress prevention, but a broader educational action oriented toward the promotion of well-being, inclusion, and social justice.

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