

EXAMINING THE CYCLE OF DEVIANCE IN SOCIAL MEDIA BODY SHAMING AMONG YOUTHS IN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT: The increasing use of social media among youth has contributed to the rise of cyber body shaming, a form of online harassment that involves the ridicule, humiliation, or mockery of individuals based on their physical appearance. Platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, X, and Facebook have increasingly become spaces where appearance-based interactions, comparisons, and online aggression occur among young users. Although existing studies have examined cyberbullying largely from psychological and media perspectives, limited scholarly attention has been given to the victim-offender overlap in cyber body shaming and how experiences of online victimisation may contribute to the reproduction of similar harmful behaviours among youths. This study, therefore, investigates the cyber-victim-offender overlap and the cycle of deviance in social media body shaming among youths. The study is anchored on the Online Disinhibition Effect, the Victim-Offender Overlap perspective, and the Social Learning Theory. The study adopted a qualitative desk-based research design, relying on secondary sources of data, including journal articles, books, online reports, documented social media incidents, and existing scholarly literature on cyberbullying, online victimisation, digital deviance, and body shaming among youths published between 2010 and 2025. Data were analysed using thematic analysis. Findings revealed that anonymity, peer validation, repeated exposure to online hostility, and the interactive nature of social media platforms contribute significantly to the persistence of cyber body shaming among youths. The study found that victims of online body shaming may later engage in similar behaviours, thereby reinforcing cycles of online victimisation and digital deviance within social media environments. The study recommends improved digital literacy, stronger online safety awareness, and more proactive institutional responses to reduce harmful online behaviours among youth.

Keywords: Cyber Body Shaming, Cyberbullying, Victim-Offender Overlap, Online Victimisation, Nigerian Youths

INTRODUCTION

The increasing integration of social media into everyday life has transformed how young people communicate, form relationships, and construct identities. Contemporary platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, Facebook, and X (formerly Twitter) serve as important media for self-expression, social interaction, and identity formation among youth (Boyd, 2014; Perloff, 2014). However, alongside these benefits, social media has facilitated various forms of online abuse, including cyberbullying and cyber body shaming (Hinduja & Patchin, 2015; Fardouly & Vartanian, 2016). Scholars have described cyber body shaming as the use of digital platforms to

ridicule, criticise, or humiliate individuals because of their physical appearance, including body size, weight, height, skin complexion, or other bodily characteristics (Perloff, 2014; Fardouly & Vartanian, 2016). According to Fardouly et al. (2015), the growing presence of appearance-centred content on social media has contributed to increased body dissatisfaction among young people. In the same vein, Tiggemann and Slater (2017) observed that frequent engagement with such content is associated with low self-esteem, anxiety, and depressive symptoms.

Research from Europe and Asia has documented the prevalence of appearance-based ridicule through trolling, memes, and social media interactions, highlighting cyber body shaming as an increasingly significant form of online victimisation among youths (Chae, 2017; Chan & Wong, 2020). Studies from countries such as South Africa, Kenya, and Ghana indicate that social media platforms have become common sites for peer aggression, ridicule, and digital victimisation among young people (Sam et al., 2019). These developments suggest that cyber body shaming is not limited to Western societies but has become a growing concern within African digital environments.

In Nigeria, increasing access to smartphones and social media platforms has created new opportunities for communication and social interaction among youths. However, these platforms have also become spaces where appearance-based ridicule and online harassment are frequently normalised through digital culture (Nwifo & Nwoke, 2019). Consequently, many youths experience body-focused humiliation and harassment within digital environments where such behaviours are often dismissed as humour or entertainment. Beyond its psychological consequences, cyber body shaming has important criminological implications. Research on cyberbullying suggests that individuals who experience online victimisation may subsequently engage in similar aggressive behaviours against others, creating a victim-offender overlap that contributes to the reproduction of deviant behaviour within digital spaces (Ttofi et al., 2011; Chan & Wong, 2020).

Despite growing literature on cyberbullying, limited attention has been devoted to understanding how cyber body-shaming victimisation may contribute to subsequent offending behaviour, particularly within the Nigerian context. Against this background, this study investigates the cycle of deviance in social media cyber body-shaming among Nigerian youths through a review of the existing literature. Specifically, the study examines how cyber body shaming is represented in existing studies, explores the relationship between victimisation and engagement in similar body-shaming behaviours, and identifies the social and technological factors that contribute to its persistence on social media. In addressing these objectives, the study seeks to answer three questions: How is cyber body shaming represented within existing literature on youth social media interactions? How does existing literature explain the relationship between cyber body-shaming victimisation and subsequent engagement in similar behaviours? What social and technological conditions facilitate the persistence and cyclical reproduction of cyber body shaming among youths on social media platforms?

CONCEPTUAL REVIEW

Cyberbullying

Cyberbullying is the intentional and repeated use of digital communication platforms to harass, embarrass, threaten, or harm others, particularly those who may be unable to adequately defend themselves (Smith et al., 2008; Peter & Petermann, 2018). Unlike traditional bullying, it takes place through online platforms such as social networking sites, messaging applications, discussion forums, and mobile devices, enabling harmful content to reach large audiences within a short period of time (Kowalski et al., 2014). The anonymity afforded by online spaces, combined with the ease of access and permanence of digital content, often amplifies the effects of victimisation and contributes to the growing significance of cyberbullying as a contemporary social problem (Hinduja & Patchin, 2015). Cyberbullying manifests in various forms, including harassment, cyberstalking, denigration, impersonation, exclusion, trolling, and the unauthorised sharing of personal information or images (Willard, 2005; Özgür, 2020). These behaviours are typically intended to cause emotional distress, damage reputations, provoke reactions, or socially isolate victims. Trolling, for example, involves the deliberate posting of inflammatory or offensive content to provoke anger and humiliation, while cyberstalking entails persistent online monitoring, threats, or unwanted communication designed to instil fear and anxiety (Peled, 2019; Worsley et al., 2017). Such practices demonstrate how digital technologies can be exploited to facilitate aggression and victimisation beyond physical boundaries.

Globally, cyberbullying has emerged as a growing concern among young people. A survey conducted by UNICEF (2019) across multiple countries found that approximately one in three young people across 30 countries reported experiencing online bullying, highlighting the widespread nature of digital victimisation. In a similar vein, Vogels (2022) found that cyberbullying remains prevalent among adolescents in the United States, taking forms such as offensive name-calling, rumour spreading, online harassment, and image-based abuse. Scholars have further noted that highly interactive social media platforms, including Instagram, Facebook, Snapchat, TikTok, and X, often serve as key venues for such behaviours because of their capacity to facilitate rapid communication and content circulation among users (Kowalski et al., 2014).

A particularly important manifestation of cyberbullying is cyber body shaming, which involves the use of digital platforms to ridicule, humiliate, or harass individuals based on their physical appearance (Hamid et al., 2018). Such behaviours are often expressed through comments, memes, edited photographs, videos, and other online materials targeting body size, weight, height, skin colour, facial characteristics, or perceived levels of attractiveness (Perloff, 2014; Fardouly & Vartanian, 2016). The growing prominence of appearance-focused content across social media platforms has contributed to the acceptance and reproduction of body-based ridicule, reinforcing cyber body shaming as a significant form of digital victimisation among young people.

Cyber Body Shaming

Cyber body shaming is a form of appearance-based online victimisation in which individuals are intentionally ridiculed, humiliated, or harassed through digital communication platforms because

of their actual or perceived physical characteristics, including body size, weight, height, skin complexion, facial features, and other bodily attributes (Langos, 2012; Schlüter et al., 2023). Through social media platforms, online forums, and messaging applications, individuals may be subjected to derogatory comments, edited images, memes, reaction videos, and other forms of appearance-based ridicule that undermine their dignity and social identity (Schlüter et al., 2023). Unlike traditional forms of appearance-based bullying, cyber body shaming occurs within digital environments characterised by anonymity, permanence, rapid dissemination of content, and broad audience participation, thereby amplifying the visibility and impact of victimisation (Kowalski et al., 2014).

The growing popularity of visually oriented social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, Facebook, and Snapchat has increased opportunities for appearance-based evaluation and social comparison among young people (Perloff, 2014; Fardouly & Vartanian, 2016). Within these digital spaces, users are frequently exposed to idealised beauty standards and appearance-focused content, creating conditions in which body-related ridicule and discrimination may flourish. Cyber body shaming commonly manifests through weight shaming, skin-tone shaming, height-related ridicule, facial mockery, and other forms of appearance-based harassment that reinforce social exclusion and negative self-perceptions (Schlüter et al., 2023).

Beyond its psychological consequences, cyber body shaming represents an important form of online deviance because it contributes to hostile digital interactions and the normalisation of appearance-based aggression. Studies on cyberbullying have shown that individuals who experience online victimisation may subsequently engage in similar harmful behaviours against others, creating a victim-offender overlap that sustains a cycle of deviance within online communities (Ttofi et al., 2011; Chan & Wong, 2020). Consequently, cyber body shaming extends beyond individual acts of harassment and may become a recurring pattern of behaviour reproduced through social media interactions.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is anchored in the Online Disinhibition Effect, Social Learning Theory, and the Victim-Offender Overlap Perspective, which provide useful explanations for the occurrence and reproduction of cyber body shaming among youths in social media environments.

Suler (2004) argues that the unique features of online communication can reduce self-restraint and social inhibition, causing individuals to behave in ways that differ from their conduct in physical social settings. As the theory postulates, features of digital communication such as anonymity, invisibility, asynchronicity, and reduced social accountability weaken self-restraint and encourage behaviours that may not occur in offline settings. Consequently, individuals may engage in hostile, aggressive, or harmful online actions without fully considering their consequences (Suler, 2004). Within social media environments, this perspective helps explain why users participate in body shaming through derogatory comments, memes, trolling, and appearance-based ridicule. The perceived distance from victims and the absence of immediate social sanctions often make such behaviours easier to perform and normalise (Espelage et al., 2012).

The study also draws on Social Learning Theory, developed by Bandura (1977), which posits that behaviours are acquired through observation, imitation, and reinforcement. The theory suggests that individuals learn behaviours by observing others, particularly when such behaviours receive social approval or reward. Within social media environments, youths are constantly exposed to body-shaming content through comments, memes, videos, and other appearance-based interactions that often attract likes, shares, and positive engagement. Such repeated exposure reinforces body shaming as acceptable online behaviour and encourages its reproduction among peers. Wali and Kanaba (2024) argue that social media serves as an important agent of socialisation for Nigerian youths, where behaviours are learned and reinforced through online interactions. Similarly, Akuneme and Nwosu (2023) observe that repeated exposure to cyberbullying contributes to the normalisation of online aggression, while Opesemowo and Taiwo (2025) found that body shaming has become increasingly common among Nigerian university students as harmful online behaviours are repeatedly observed and replicated within peer networks. Consequently, Social Learning Theory explains how cyber body shaming is learned, reinforced, and reproduced among youths, thereby contributing to the cycle of deviance in online environments.

The Victim-Offender Overlap Perspective challenges the traditional distinction between victims and offenders by arguing that both experiences are often interconnected rather than mutually exclusive (Gottfredson, 1981). Studies have consistently shown that individuals who experience victimisation are more likely to engage in offending behaviours, creating a cyclical relationship between the two phenomena (Jennings et al., 2010; Reingle et al., 2011). Within digital environments, youths who experience cyberbullying may subsequently engage in similar behaviours toward others as a form of retaliation, adaptation, or learned behaviour (Hinduja & Patchin, 2015). Applied to cyber body shaming, the perspective suggests that victims of appearance-based online harassment may later become perpetrators themselves, thereby reproducing harmful behaviours and sustaining a cycle of deviance within social media interactions.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a desk-based qualitative research design and utilised documentary sources of data. Relevant materials published between 2010 and 2025 were obtained from peer-reviewed journal articles, books, policy documents, institutional reports, conference proceedings, and other scholarly publications relating to cyber body shaming, cyberbullying, victim-offender overlap, online deviance, and youths' use of social media. Literature was sourced mainly through Google Scholar, Scopus, and Web of Science using search terms such as "cyber body shaming," "cyberbullying," "body shaming," "victim-offender overlap," "online deviance," "social media body shaming," "social learning theory," "online disinhibition," and "youth social media use." Since some relevant studies, particularly conference proceedings and publications from Nigerian psychology, criminology, communication, and other social science journals, are not always indexed in these databases, additional materials were identified through manual searches of reference lists, publisher websites, institutional repositories, African Journals Online (AJOL), and other credible organisational websites. The documents selected for this study were chosen based on their relevance to the study objectives and their ability to provide useful insights into the

nature of cyber body shaming and the relationship between victimisation and offending in online environments. Data generated from the reviewed literature were analysed using thematic content analysis. This involved identifying, organising, and interpreting recurring themes and patterns relating to cyber body shaming, the victim-offender overlap, and the social and technological factors that sustain and reproduce body-shaming behaviours among youths on social media.

THEME 1: REPRESENTATION OF CYBER BODY SHAMING ON SOCIAL MEDIA

The literature consistently portrays cyber body shaming as a prominent form of appearance-based cyberbullying embedded within contemporary social media culture (Langos, 2012; Schlüter et al., 2023). Existing studies define it as the use of digital platforms to ridicule, humiliate, stigmatise, or socially marginalise individuals based on actual or perceived physical characteristics such as body size, weight, height, skin complexion, facial features, and other bodily attributes (Langos, 2012; Schlüter et al., 2023). However, the reviewed literature suggests that cyber body shaming extends beyond isolated acts of online hostility and has become a normalised feature of digital interaction, particularly within highly visual platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, Facebook, and Snapchat, where appearance is continuously displayed, evaluated, and compared (Perloff, 2014; Fardouly & Vartanian, 2016).

A dominant theme emerging from the literature is that social media transforms the body into a publicly visible object of evaluation. Through photographs, short videos, live streams, and influencer content, users are repeatedly exposed to idealised representations of beauty and attractiveness, thereby encouraging social comparison and appearance-based judgements (Perloff, 2014; Tiggemann & Slater, 2017). Within such environments, bodily appearance increasingly functions as a form of social capital, while deviations from socially desirable beauty standards often become targets of criticism, ridicule, and public commentary (Fardouly & Vartanian, 2016). Consequently, cyber body shaming is represented not merely as interpersonal aggression but as a broader social practice through which dominant standards of attractiveness are reinforced and policed online.

Empirical evidence further demonstrates the prevalence of appearance-focused victimisation in digital spaces. Ringrose et al. (2024) reported that 18.8% of participants had experienced online body shaming, while more than half of those affected perceived an increase in such incidents during the COVID-19 period. The study also found that 65.9% of victims experienced emotional distress following body-shaming encounters, highlighting the significant psychosocial impact of appearance-based online harassment. Similarly, Puluhalawa and Husain (2021) observed that body shaming has become a significant form of digital harm, noting that Indonesian authorities recorded 966 body-shaming cases in 2018, thereby illustrating the scale and visibility of appearance-based victimisation within social media environments.

The Nigerian context further reinforces these patterns. In a study of female university undergraduates in Nigeria, Femi-Aderinto (2025) found that body shaming remains a significant challenge, with participants reporting experiences of ridicule, appearance-based criticism, and psychological distress that affected their self-esteem, confidence, and social interactions. The study further revealed that many of these experiences occurred within peer and digital

environments, underscoring the growing influence of social media in shaping body image perceptions and facilitating appearance-based victimisation among young people. These findings demonstrate that cyber body shaming is not merely a global phenomenon but an increasingly important social issue within the Nigerian context, highlighting the need for greater scholarly attention to its causes, consequences, and persistence among youths (Femi-Aderinto, 2025).

Another important insight emerging from the reviewed literature is the normalisation of body-shaming behaviour within online culture. Ringrose et al. (2024) observed that body-positive and appearance-diverse content frequently attracted derogatory comments and hostile reactions, indicating that social media users often participate in the policing of dominant beauty norms through ridicule and public shaming. Similar concerns are reflected in the Nigerian literature, where body-shaming experiences among young women are increasingly discussed as part of broader social pressures surrounding appearance, femininity, and social acceptance (Femi-Aderinto, 2025). As a result, harmful behaviours are often reframed as humour, trolling, banter, or entertainment, thereby obscuring their victimising effects and reducing social condemnation.

Overall, the literature represents cyber body shaming as a socially embedded and technologically mediated form of digital victimisation sustained by visual culture, social comparison, beauty norm enforcement, audience participation, and platform structures that reward engagement with appearance-focused content (Perloff, 2014; Ringrose et al., 2024). Rather than occurring as isolated incidents, cyber body shaming emerges as a recurring feature of contemporary social media interactions that shapes both how young people are evaluated by others and how they construct and regulate their own online identities.

THEME 2: VICTIM-OFFENDER OVERLAP IN CYBER BODY SHAMING

A major theme emerging from the reviewed literature is the interconnected relationship between victimisation and offending within online environments. Traditional criminological perspectives often classify individuals as either victims or offenders. However, the victim-offender overlap perspective challenges this distinction by arguing that the same individuals frequently experience both roles, often within the same social and digital contexts (Gottfredson, 1981; Jennings et al., 2010). Empirical research consistently demonstrates that victimisation significantly increases the likelihood of offending, suggesting that victimisation and offending are not separate experiences but interconnected processes that reinforce one another (Jennings et al., 2011; Reingle et al., 2011).

Within digital environments, this overlap is particularly evident. Hinduja and Patchin (2015) argue that many adolescents involved in cyberbullying alternate between being victims and perpetrators over time. Similarly, Chan and Wong (2020) found a significant association between cyberbullying victimisation and perpetration among adolescents, indicating that individuals who experience online harassment are more likely to engage in similar forms of aggression toward others. These findings suggest that online victimisation does not always produce passive victims; rather, it may facilitate the development of retaliatory or imitative behaviours that contribute to the continuation of online deviance.

Broader cybercrime research provides further support for this relationship. Weulen Kranenbarg et al. (2019) found substantial overlap between cybercrime victimisation and offending and concluded that both experiences are shaped by common risk factors, including low self-control, extensive online exposure, and engagement in risky online activities. The study further argues that cyber victimisation and offending should be examined together because the same conditions that increase exposure to victimisation often create opportunities for offending. Similarly, Lin et al. (2024) found that online victimisation and offending frequently co-occur among university students, with lifestyle exposure and routine online activities serving as important predictors of overlap. Together, these studies suggest that online environments simultaneously create opportunities for victimisation and offending, thereby increasing the likelihood that individuals will experience both roles.

The reviewed literature indicates that cyber body shaming follows a similar pattern. Victims of appearance-based harassment frequently report emotional distress, anxiety, shame, body dissatisfaction, and reduced self-esteem (Ringrose et al., 2024; Kudlová et al., 2024). However, repeated exposure to appearance-based ridicule may also normalise hostile online communication and alter perceptions regarding acceptable social behaviour (Chan & Wong, 2020). In digital environments where body-shaming comments are frequently dismissed as humour, trolling, banter, or “cruise,” victims may gradually internalise such behaviours as ordinary features of online interaction (Puluhulawa & Husain, 2021). Consequently, body-shaming practices become socially learned and reproduced rather than challenged.

Research further suggests that many forms of online ridicule are trivialised as entertainment or playful interaction, thereby reducing the likelihood that harmful behaviours will be recognised as victimisation. Within such environments, repeated exposure to appearance-based criticism may contribute to behavioural learning and normalisation, increasing the likelihood that victims will engage in similar conduct toward others. Findings from Femi-Aderinto (2025) further demonstrate that body-shaming experiences among Nigerian female university students are closely connected to peer evaluations and appearance-based social expectations. These findings suggest that victims are often situated within social environments where body-focused judgements are routinely reinforced, thereby creating conditions for the reproduction of similar behaviours.

Another important observation emerging from the literature is that social media platforms facilitate rapid transitions between victim and offender roles. Unlike traditional bullying settings where individuals may occupy relatively stable positions, digital environments allow users to move easily between being targets and perpetrators of online aggression (Hinduja & Patchin, 2015). A user who experiences ridicule regarding their appearance may subsequently participate in mocking another individual through comments, memes, reposts, or other forms of online engagement. The anonymity, visibility, and interactivity of social media therefore contribute to a fluid exchange between victimisation and offending, reinforcing the persistence of cyber body shaming within online communities.

Overall, the reviewed literature suggests that cyber body shaming should not be understood solely as a victimisation issue. Rather, it operates within a broader victim-offender continuum in which

experiences of appearance-based harassment increase the likelihood of engaging in similar behaviours toward others. The findings therefore support the victim-offender overlap perspective by demonstrating that victims and offenders are often interconnected participants within the same digital environment. This overlap provides an important foundation for understanding how cyber body shaming develops into a self-sustaining cycle of deviance among Nigerian youths on social media.

THEME 3: SOCIAL FACTORS SUSTAINING CYBER BODY SHAMING

The reviewed literature indicates that cyber body shaming is sustained not merely by individual hostility but by broader social processes that shape perceptions of appearance, identity, and social acceptance among youths. Three interconnected factors consistently emerge as central to the persistence of cyber body shaming on social media: peer pressure, social comparison, and dominant beauty standards (Perloff, 2014; Fardouly & Vartanian, 2016). These factors collectively create social environments in which appearance-based judgements are normalised and reproduced through everyday online interactions.

A major social factor identified in the literature is peer pressure. Young people are particularly influenced by the need for social acceptance, group belonging, and peer validation, making them more likely to conform to prevailing norms within their social networks (Valkenburg & Peter, 2011; Nesi et al., 2018). Within social media environments, audience engagement mechanisms such as likes, comments, reposts, and shares often reward content that attracts attention, including ridicule and appearance-based mockery (Ringrose et al., 2024). As a result, body-shaming behaviours may be reinforced because they generate visibility, amusement, and peer approval. Supporting this argument, Nkopuruk et al. (2026) found that interactions among Nigerian university students on X (formerly Twitter) frequently involve ridicule, derogatory language, public shaming, and verbal attacks that serve as mechanisms for negotiating power, status, and recognition within online communities. Such findings suggest that participation in online harassment is often motivated not only by personal prejudice but also by the desire to gain social relevance and acceptance within digital peer groups (Nkopuruk et al., 2026).

The literature also identifies social comparison as a significant factor contributing to cyber body shaming. According to Social Comparison Theory, individuals evaluate their self-worth and attractiveness by comparing themselves with others, particularly in environments where appearance is highly visible and socially valued (Festinger, 1954). Social media platforms intensify this tendency by exposing users to carefully curated photographs, edited images, influencer content, and idealised portrayals of beauty and success (Perloff, 2014; Fardouly & Vartanian, 2016). Repeated exposure to such content often encourages users to assess their physical appearance against unrealistic standards, resulting in body dissatisfaction and heightened appearance consciousness (Fardouly & Vartanian, 2016). Consequently, social comparison not only influences how individuals perceive themselves but also shapes how they evaluate others, thereby creating conditions under which body-shaming behaviours become more likely.

Closely linked to social comparison is the influence of dominant beauty standards. Existing studies consistently show that social media platforms reinforce narrow and often unrealistic ideals

of attractiveness through influencers, celebrities, advertisements, and user-generated content (Perloff, 2014; Tiggemann & Slater, 2017). These ideals frequently privilege specific body types, skin tones, facial features, and physical characteristics while stigmatising those who deviate from socially desirable norms (Fardouly & Vartanian, 2016). Ringrose et al. (2024) further observed that body-positive and appearance-diverse content often attracts hostile comments and derogatory reactions, suggesting that online users actively participate in enforcing dominant beauty norms through ridicule and public criticism. In this sense, cyber body shaming functions as a mechanism through which conformity to prevailing standards of attractiveness is monitored and maintained.

Within the Nigerian context, the influence of beauty standards is particularly significant because globalised ideals intersect with local cultural expectations regarding physical appearance. Femi-Aderinto (2025) found that Nigerian female university students frequently reported experiences of body shaming related to body size, complexion, and other physical attributes, reflecting broader societal expectations concerning attractiveness and social acceptance. These findings suggest that body shaming is embedded within everyday social interactions and extends beyond digital spaces into wider cultural practices. As social media increasingly mediates youth interactions, these pre-existing appearance-based judgements become amplified through greater visibility, audience participation, and opportunities for public commentary (Femi-Aderinto, 2025).

Another important insight emerging from the literature is that cyber body shaming often functions as a form of social regulation. Nkopuruk et al. (2026) argue that online shaming practices among Nigerian students are frequently used to establish symbolic boundaries regarding who is accepted, respected, or marginalised within digital communities. Through ridicule, exclusionary language, sarcasm, and public humiliation, users reinforce social norms and regulate behaviour within online spaces (Nkopuruk et al., 2026). When applied to physical appearance, these practices transform body shaming into a mechanism through which individuals are pressured to conform to socially approved standards of attractiveness. Consequently, appearance-based ridicule becomes not merely a form of interpersonal aggression but also a means of enforcing broader social expectations.

Overall, the reviewed literature demonstrates that peer pressure, social comparison, and beauty standards operate as mutually reinforcing social forces that sustain cyber body shaming among youths. Beauty standards establish the criteria against which individuals are judged (Perloff, 2014; Tiggemann & Slater, 2017), social comparison encourages continuous evaluation of self and others (Festinger, 1954; Fardouly & Vartanian, 2016), while peer pressure rewards participation in appearance-based judgements and online ridicule (Valkenburg & Peter, 2011; Nkopuruk et al., 2026). Together, these processes normalise cyber body shaming and contribute to its continued reproduction within social media environments, thereby reinforcing the broader cycle of deviance among youths.

THEME 4: TECHNOLOGICAL FACTORS SUSTAINING CYBER BODY SHAMING

Beyond social influences, the reviewed literature indicates that cyber body shaming is sustained by the technological architecture of social media platforms. Unlike traditional forms of bullying, cyber body shaming occurs within digital environments specifically designed to encourage

interaction, visibility, content sharing, and audience engagement (Suler, 2004; Perloff, 2014). Existing studies consistently identify anonymity, virality, and algorithmic amplification as key technological factors that facilitate the persistence and reproduction of cyber body shaming among youths (Hinduja & Patchin, 2015; Ringrose et al., 2024). These platform characteristics not only increase opportunities for appearance-based harassment but also expand its reach, visibility, and impact.

One of the most significant technological drivers of cyber body shaming is anonymity. According to Suler's (2004) Online Disinhibition Effect, individuals often exhibit lower levels of self-restraint in online environments because digital platforms allow users to conceal or manipulate their identities. Through anonymous accounts, pseudonyms, and alternative profiles, users may feel protected from social sanctions and therefore become more willing to engage in aggressive or harmful behaviour (Suler, 2004). This reduced accountability weakens conventional social controls and increases the likelihood of hostile online interactions (Espelage et al., 2012). Within the context of cyber body shaming, anonymity enables individuals to ridicule others based on body size, skin complexion, facial appearance, height, or other physical attributes without immediate consequences. Similar patterns have been documented in Nigerian digital spaces, where cyberbullying frequently occurs through insults, ridicule, derogatory language, and public humiliation directed at individuals across online platforms (Amuzie, 2025). The relative distance between perpetrators and victims often reduces empathy and encourages behaviours that would be considered unacceptable in face-to-face interactions (Suler, 2004; Amuzie, 2025).

Another technological factor sustaining cyber body shaming is virality. Social media platforms enable content to spread rapidly through reposts, retweets, shares, duets, stitches, and other engagement features, facilitating mass dissemination (Langos, 2012; Perloff, 2014). Unlike traditional bullying, which is typically restricted to specific social settings, cyber body-shaming content can reach large audiences within a very short period (Hinduja & Patchin, 2015). Ringrose et al. (2024) observe that appearance-based ridicule often attracts substantial audience engagement, thereby increasing the visibility of harmful content and encouraging additional participation. Through comments, memes, reaction videos, and reposts, users collectively contribute to the spread of body-shaming content, transforming individual acts of harassment into wider forms of public victimisation. Studies of Nigerian online discourse similarly reveal that cyberbullying frequently occurs in highly visible digital environments where public participation and audience reactions intensify the impact of online attacks (Amuzie, 2025). Consequently, the viral nature of social media significantly increases both the reach and persistence of cyber body-shaming incidents.

The permanence and replicability of digital content further strengthen the effects of virality. Harmful comments, photographs, videos, and memes can remain accessible long after their initial publication, exposing victims to repeated episodes of humiliation and psychological distress (Langos, 2012; Hinduja & Patchin, 2015). Unlike offline bullying, which may be confined to a specific moment or location, cyber body shaming can continue indefinitely through archived posts, screenshots, reposts, and digital records. This technological characteristic increases the duration of victimisation and creates opportunities for repeated exposure to harmful content (Langos, 2012).

A third factor identified within the literature is algorithmic amplification. Contemporary social media platforms rely on recommendation systems designed to maximise user engagement by promoting content that generates reactions, comments, shares, and prolonged attention (Perloff, 2014). Research suggests that emotionally charged, controversial, or provocative content often attracts greater engagement and is therefore more likely to be amplified by platform algorithms (Fardouly & Vartanian, 2016). Although social media companies do not intentionally promote cyberbullying, algorithmic systems may inadvertently increase the visibility of body-shaming content because it often generates significant user engagement (Ringrose et al., 2024). As engagement increases, algorithms may recommend the content to larger audiences, thereby creating a cycle in which appearance-based ridicule receives further exposure and participation.

Evidence from studies of online discourse further demonstrates that digital platforms increasingly function as spaces where visibility determines influence and relevance (Nkopuruk et al., 2026; Amuzie, 2025). Within such environments, users may deliberately create provocative or insulting content to attract engagement, followers, and public attention. As a result, body-shaming posts that generate strong reactions are often rewarded with increased visibility, regardless of the potential harm caused to victims. The technological logic of engagement therefore contributes to the normalisation and reproduction of appearance-based harassment across digital platforms.

Taken together, the reviewed literature suggests that anonymity, virality, and algorithmic amplification operate as interconnected technological mechanisms that sustain cyber body shaming among youths. Anonymity reduces accountability and encourages hostile behaviour (Suler, 2004); virality expands the reach and visibility of appearance-based harassment (Langos, 2012); and algorithmic amplification increases exposure to content that generates engagement (Perloff, 2014; Ringrose et al., 2024). These technological affordances create environments in which cyber body shaming can spread rapidly, attract widespread participation, and persist over time. Consequently, the findings indicate that cyber body shaming is not merely a product of individual behaviour but is also facilitated by the structural features of contemporary social media platforms, thereby reinforcing the broader cycle of deviance among youths in digital environments.

THEME 5: THE CYCLE OF DEVIANCE IN CYBER BODY SHAMING

A dominant theme emerging from the reviewed literature is that cyber body shaming functions as a self-reinforcing cycle of deviance in which victimisation and offending become interconnected and mutually sustaining. Rather than existing as separate social categories, victims and perpetrators frequently occupy overlapping positions within digital environments, creating a pattern in which experiences of victimisation may contribute to subsequent offending behaviour (Hinduja & Patchin, 2015; Chan & Wong, 2020; Weulen Kranenbarg et al., 2019; Rabbani & Pusch, 2025). The literature suggests that cyber body shaming is best understood as a cyclical process involving victimisation, internalisation, retaliation, perpetration, and re-victimisation, through which appearance-based harassment becomes continuously reproduced within social media spaces.

The cycle often begins with victimisation. Existing studies show that young people are frequently exposed to appearance-based ridicule through derogatory comments, trolling, memes, edited photographs, reaction videos, and public humiliation targeting body size, weight, complexion, facial features, height, or other physical characteristics (Langos, 2012; Schlüter et al., 2023; Ringrose et al., 2024). Such experiences have been associated with body dissatisfaction, shame, anxiety, emotional distress, reduced self-esteem, and feelings of social exclusion (Perloff, 2014; Fardouly & Vartanian, 2016). In the Nigerian context, Femi-Aderinto (2025) found that female university students frequently encountered appearance-based criticisms related to body size, skin tone, and other physical features, demonstrating that body shaming remains a significant social experience among young people.

The literature further suggests that repeated exposure to body-shaming practices often results in internalisation. Perloff (2014) argues that social media environments encourage users to evaluate themselves through externally imposed standards of attractiveness, while Fardouly and Vartanian (2016) contend that continuous exposure to idealised images intensifies appearance-based self-evaluation and body dissatisfaction. Over time, victims may begin to accept appearance-based judgements as normal or legitimate, thereby internalising the values and assumptions embedded within body-shaming discourse (Tiggemann & Slater, 2017). This normalisation process is significant because it transforms cyber body shaming from an exceptional act of aggression into a routine feature of online interaction (Puluhulawa & Husain, 2021).

Internalisation may subsequently create conditions for retaliation. Research on the victim-offender overlap consistently demonstrates that individuals who experience victimisation are more likely to engage in offending behaviour later, particularly where aggression is perceived as an acceptable response to harm (Jennings et al., 2010; Jennings et al., 2011; Reingle et al., 2011). Supporting this position, Chan and Wong (2020) found a significant relationship between cyberbullying victimisation and perpetration among adolescents. Within cyber body-shaming contexts, victims may retaliate by directing appearance-based insults toward others as a means of restoring self-worth, regaining social status, or diverting attention from their own insecurities. Consequently, victimisation becomes a pathway through which new perpetrators are produced.

The transition from retaliation to perpetration is further facilitated by the technological characteristics of social media platforms. According to Suler's (2004) Online Disinhibition Effect, anonymity, invisibility, and reduced accountability weaken behavioural restraints and encourage hostile online conduct. Similarly, Amuzie (2025) observed that cyberbullying within Nigerian online spaces frequently manifests through insults, ridicule, mockery, derogatory labels, and coordinated attacks directed at individuals. Nkopuruk et al. (2026) further found that online interactions among Nigerian university students often involve public humiliation, verbal aggression, and symbolic struggles for social recognition and status. These findings suggest that social media environments provide both the opportunity and motivation for previously victimised individuals to engage in body-shaming behaviours toward others.

Beyond individual retaliation, the reviewed literature indicates that cyber body shaming functions as a mechanism of symbolic violence through which dominant social norms are reproduced and enforced. Drawing on the concept of symbolic violence, Lumsden and Morgan (2017) argue that

online abuse frequently operates as a silencing strategy used to marginalise, discredit, and exclude targeted individuals from digital participation. Their analysis demonstrates that cyber trolling often targets personal identities and bodily characteristics while reinforcing existing social hierarchies and relations of power. Within the context of cyber body shaming, appearance-based ridicule therefore serves not only to insult individuals but also to police conformity to dominant beauty standards and socially approved identities. Those whose bodies deviate from perceived ideals become vulnerable to public humiliation, exclusion, and stigmatisation.

Importantly, perpetration does not represent the endpoint of the process. Weulen Kranenbarg et al. (2019) found that cyber offenders frequently experience victimisation themselves, highlighting the fluid and reciprocal nature of online interactions. Similarly, Hinduja and Patchin (2015) observed that many young people involved in cyberbullying alternate between victim and offender roles over time. Social media platforms expose users simultaneously to opportunities for victimisation and offending, increasing the likelihood that individuals who body shame others may themselves become targets of similar attacks. This process creates a victim-offender continuum in which victimisation and offending continuously reinforce one another rather than occurring as isolated experiences (Jennings et al., 2010; Reingle et al., 2011).

The persistence of this cycle is reinforced by the social and technological factors identified in the preceding themes. Peer pressure, social comparison, and dominant beauty standards normalise appearance-based judgements and encourage conformity to idealised standards of attractiveness (Perloff, 2014; Fardouly & Vartanian, 2016; Femi-Aderinto, 2025). At the same time, anonymity, virality, and algorithmic amplification increase the visibility, reach, and durability of body-shaming content across social media platforms (Suler, 2004; Langos, 2012; Ringrose et al., 2024). Together, these factors create conditions in which cyber body shaming becomes embedded within everyday online interactions and continuously reproduced through recurring patterns of victimisation and offending.

Overall, the reviewed literature suggests that cyber body shaming among youths is best understood as a cycle of deviance rather than a one-dimensional form of victimisation. The evidence presented by Chan and Wong (2020), Hinduja and Patchin (2015), Weulen Kranenbarg et al. (2019), Rabbani and Pusch (2025), Lumsden and Morgan (2017), Nkopuruk et al. (2026), Amuzie (2025), and Femi-Aderinto (2025) collectively demonstrates that cyber body shaming is sustained through interconnected processes of victimisation, internalisation, retaliation, perpetration, and re-victimisation. Consequently, cyber body shaming represents not merely an individual act of online aggression but a socially and technologically reinforced cycle through which deviant behaviour is learned, normalised, reproduced, and sustained within contemporary youth digital culture.

Conclusion

This study examined the cycle of deviance in cyber body shaming among youths on social media using a desk-based qualitative approach. The findings showed that cyber body shaming has become a common form of online victimisation, driven by social influences such as peer pressure, social comparison, and unrealistic beauty standards, as well as technological features including

anonymity, virality, and algorithmic amplification. The study also found that victims may later become perpetrators, creating a victim-offender overlap that sustains the cycle of cyber body shaming. Although the study relied solely on secondary sources of data and is therefore subject to the limitations associated with documentary research, including the possibility of publication bias and the absence of primary empirical evidence, the findings provide valuable insights into the social and technological dynamics that sustain cyber body shaming among youths. Overall, the study highlights the need for collaborative efforts by policymakers, educators, parents, and social media platforms to promote safer, more responsible, and more inclusive online interactions.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, educational institutions, youth organisations, and parents should strengthen digital literacy and responsible social media education by creating greater awareness of the harmful consequences of cyber body shaming and promoting respectful online interactions among youths. At the same time, social media companies should strengthen their content moderation systems by ensuring that offensive comments, appearance-based insults, and other body-shaming content are automatically detected, flagged, reviewed, and removed before they spread widely across online platforms.

Furthermore, social media platforms should adopt stricter sanctions for users who repeatedly engage in cyber body shaming. Such measures may include temporary account restrictions, mandatory time-outs, suspension of commenting privileges, and permanent account bans for persistent offenders. Since engagement-driven algorithms often increase the visibility of controversial and abusive content, platform providers should also review their recommendation systems to prioritise positive and respectful interactions while limiting the amplification of body-shaming content.

Finally, educational institutions, mental health professionals, and relevant government agencies should establish accessible support services to assist victims in coping with the emotional and psychological effects of cyber body shaming. Given that victims may subsequently become perpetrators, intervention programmes should not focus solely on punishment but should also incorporate counselling, behavioural interventions, peer-support initiatives, and sustained awareness campaigns aimed at breaking the cycle of deviance and preventing the continued reproduction of appearance-based harassment among youths.

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