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Fashion Bullying: Coping Behavior of Teenagers

Abstract

For some it might be a source of entertainment but for others it may lead to a distressed and miserable life. Fashion bullying is an area of great concern as teenagers all across the globe are being scrutinized and criticized for what they wear. This sort of scrutiny varies from pleasant annotations like, “you are looking nice today” to more severe acts of social exclusion and personal attacks. This is directly affecting the psychological health of upcoming young generation and in some of the cases it has even lead to suicides. With globalization of economies and wider reach of brands fashion bullying concerns are now diluting even to underdeveloped and developing countries.

Guidance counselors and psychiatrists say that fashion bullying is now reaching a new level of intensity as more and more designers are launching collections targeted at kids. This era of big brands is making bullying an intense problem. Even the media exposure to clothing has a huge impact on the youth, the celebrities and teenage icons are sporting the up-to-the-minute trends and there is a lot of desire and peer pressure to be like them. This is something that we just can't write-off by saying “it's just a phase”.

This paper will be of interest to the parents, students and psychiatrists to come across with a solution to this distressing dilemma.

Research Objective

This research is conducted to analyze how different victims of bullying react and muddle through such situations. An attempt is made to draw a relationship between the personality traits of the victims and how they cope up.

Methodology and Approach

As this was a very sensitive issue for the victims, focus group interviews was considered to be best source of collecting information. To understand the personality traits of victims a questionnaire based survey was also conducted.

Other than this, intensive study was also done of various articles and reports available on World Wide Web and journals.

Research Limitations

Since this is a very insightful issue the victims might not have provided the complete details. Moreover convenience sampling technique was used to arrive at the final sample, thus the sample research might not reflect the true story of total population.

Paper Type

Research Paper

Introduction

Bullying is an act of intentionally causing harm to others, through verbal harassment, physical assault, or other more subtle methods of coercion such as manipulation. It is an act of repeated aggressive behavior in order to intentionally hurt another person, physically or mentally. Bullying is characterized by an individual behaving in a certain way to gain power over another person. Behaviors may include name calling, verbal or written abuse, exclusion from activities, exclusion from social situations, physical abuse, or coercion. Bullies may behave this way to be perceived as popular or tough or to get attention. They may bully out of jealousy or be acting out because they themselves are bullied (Crothers & Levinson, 2004). Bullying can be done in many forms such as Cyber Bullying, Gang Bullying, Peer Bullying, Physical Bullying, Racist Bullying and Fashion Bullying. Out of these various unacceptable acts, the cases of Fashion Bullying have drastically increased in recent years. Fashion bullies often act like 'fashion police', they like to embarrass and hurt other people because of their clothing choices. Fashion bullies tease people who aren't wearing brands, designer or expensive clothes. It happens because clothing is seen as a visible outworking of social popularity and status. The use of clothing was first done to set up a social hierarchy and to leverage supremacy probably when a caveman impressed his cave mates by wrapping himself in a tiger's skin rather than a flea bitten antelope hide. From the Golden Age of Greece to the Massachusetts Bay Colony, sumptuary laws kept the lower classes in their place by dictating style, color, fabric, and ornamentation of clothing based on rank, title, or income. Teenagers in middle school may use designer logos to determine status, but at least their discrimination by consumption is not legally authorized and enforced.

Overview of literature

The review of literature survey highlights that fashion bullying is arising not only because of peer group complexities, but also because of highly ambitious parents. Young people are being bullied basically for two reasons: Either they are dressed inappropriately or they are dressed too well. This trend is observed in many European, US schools where there are no uniforms for the kids and parents fill their closets with so many brands. Last year such a case was published in the Wall Street Journal, a sixth grade girl was bullied by her friends because she was wearing wrong brands in the school (O'Connell 2007). The Journal article cites designers targeting the child and teen market in the last few years, creating lines for kids and including more affordable pieces and accessories for this market. Fashion Bullying cases are rising hastily in the schools where students are not required to wear school uniforms, the parents want uniforms into school as the focus of these kids should be education, not the belief of flaunting brands (Braverman 2007). Teen magazines and Television has also amplified designer-brand recognition. Cheryl Dellasega, Ph.D., Professor of Humanities and Women's Studies at Penn State University wrote the ground-breaking book *Surviving Ophelia*, which explored issues of development in teen girls. In November's issue of her e-zine, *Club Ophelia*, Dellasega addresses fashion bullying and includes a revealing story shared by teen who was both a participant and victim of fashion bullying. Here's an excerpt from her story:

“At lunchtime, my friends would talk about where they shopped and what outfits they liked. They would make fun of girls who didn't wear the same clothing they did. I would join in the taunts and conversations even though, secretly, I was one of those girls. My parents didn't have much money, unlike my friends. My mom and dad could not afford to buy me expensive clothing and shoes.”

In a 1978 study, Olweus described three different types of bully: the aggressive bully, the passive bully and the bully-victim. These characterizations are:

- Aggressive bullies are the most common type of bully. Young people who fall into this category tend to be physically strong, impulsive, hot-tempered, quarrelsome, fearless, coercive, confident, and lacking in empathy for their victims. They have an aggressive personality and are motivated by power and the desire to dominate others. They are also likely to make negative attributions, often seeing slights or hostility in those around them where neither of these actually exists. According to Olweus, the aggressive bully tends to be most popular in the early school years and then less so in the upper grades — perhaps because young children are more likely than older students to admire the macho image. As students get older, they are able to think critically about peers and "leaders" in a better way.

- Passive bullies, unlike the ultra-confident aggressive bullies, tend to be insecure. They are also much less popular than the aggressive bullies and often have low-self esteem, few pleasant traits, and unhappy home lives. Passive bullies also appear to have difficulties concentrating and focusing their attention at school, as well as violent outbursts or temper tantrums that lead to problems with their peers. Rather than initiating a bullying interaction, passive bullies tend to hang back until one is already under way — usually at the instigation of an aggressive bully. Once a bullying incident begins, passive bullies become enthusiastic participants. In fact, passive bullies are very quick to align themselves with and display intense loyalty to the more powerful aggressive bullies. Some researchers refer to this group as anxious bullies.

- Bully-victims represent a small percentage of bullies who have been seriously bullied themselves. Bully-victims are often physically weaker and less fashion

conscious than those who bully them but are almost always physically stronger than their own victims. They possess some of the same characteristics as provocative victims; they are easily aroused and sometimes provoke others who are clearly weaker than they are. Bully-victims are generally unpopular with their peers, and they are more likely than other types of bullies to be both anxious and depressed.

The literature review thus not only provided useful insights about the problem but also suggested few alternatives that can be implemented to stop the Bullying activities.

How does it happen?

The course of action begins with the bully who starts bullying along with passive bullies joining in and ends up with the sufferer.

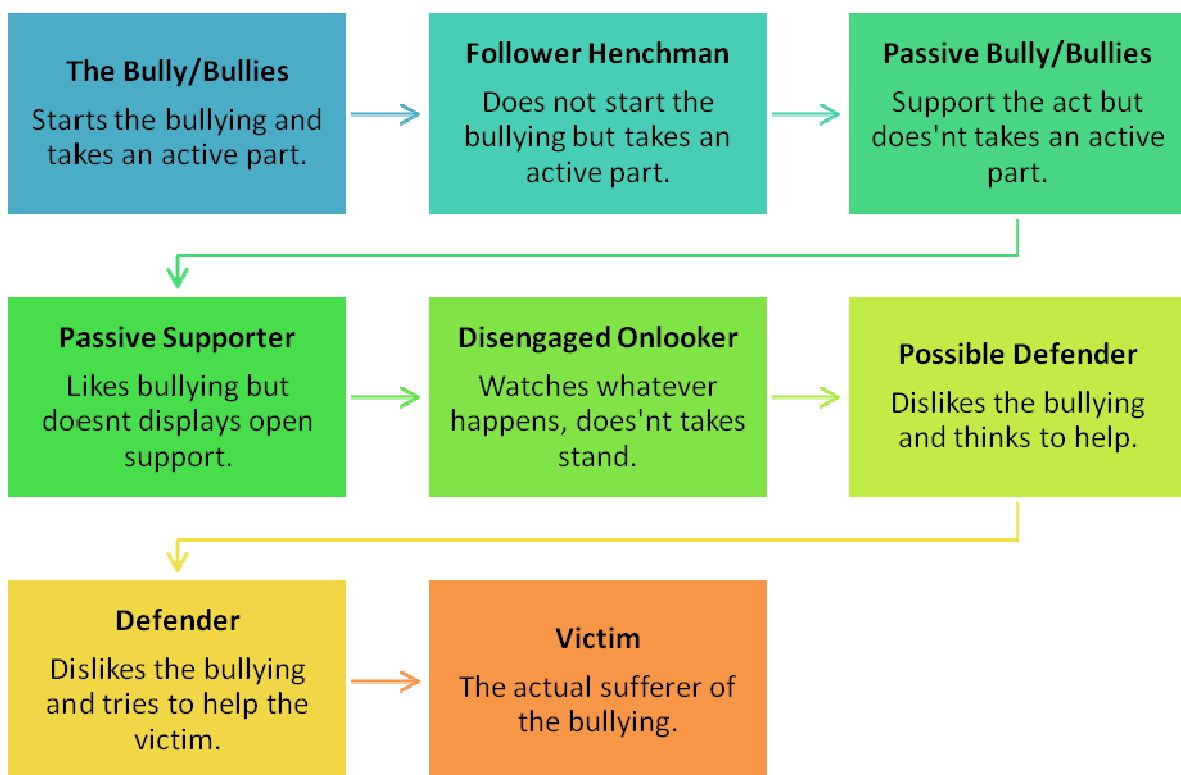


Figure 1 Cycle of Bullying (Goldy, n.d.)

Fashion Bullying in Entertainment Industry

Fashion bullying is evident even in Entertainment industries all over the world. Some of the movies and hit television soaps have presented fashion bullying as a major source of amusement. Devil wears Prada is an appropriate example of this serious affair. The vulnerable assistant is the subject of gossip for all the fashionistas around her in the fashion magazine house. Her boss gives her harsh looks for not being fashionably dressed.

The popular TV series Ugly Betty remarks this issue noticeably, where the protagonist lacks fashion sense and is being singled out of the city. Even the Indian version of this hit television series Jassi Jaisi Koi Nahin was true representation of fashion bullying. The intelligent and hard working secretary was teased by her colleagues for her clumsy and bespectacled looks.

“What not to wear” a popular Television show features fashion bullying as entertainment. Each week Stacy and Clinton the hosts of the show, surprise attack a fashion victim, criticizing her appearance, both verbally and literally trashing her wardrobe. They harass and insult the victim while she shops according to their ‘fashion rules’. After she submits to a total fashion renovation, Stacy and Clinton offer her acceptance and approval. Each show ends with a homecoming celebration where the former fashion disaster returns to fawning friends and family who gush with admiration as the remade sophisticated, self-confident “new woman” sweeps into the room.

Although these serials and movies left a positive impact that the victims were naïve and innocent, people took these names and started bullying real life naïve.

Reasons for Growing Fashion Bullying

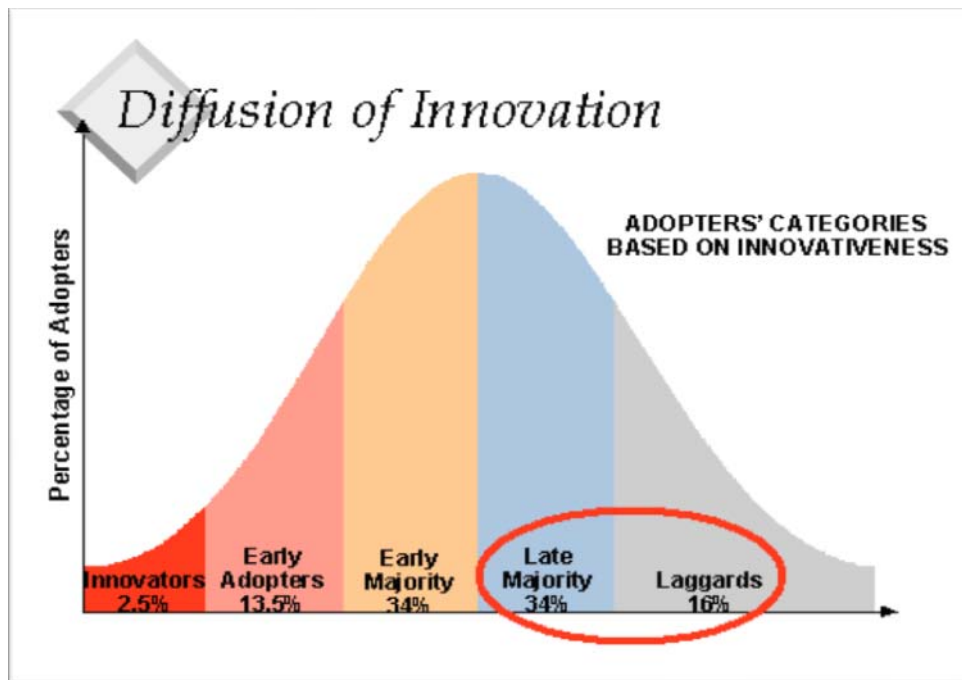
The cases of fashion bullying are increasing world over, reasons being-

Globalization:

With the globalization of economies all around the world, international brands are now being launched even into less developed and developing countries where the income gaps among the population are really wide. In such countries only few people can afford to buy branded cloths and the lower middle class is just a spectator to it. This factor has led to increase in fashion bullying as middle class families cannot afford to pamper their kids with brands. The upper strata children are becoming superior because of this reason and they dominate and act as bullies. Those who do not own the right brands are discriminated and they experience social impacts which include being teased, bullied, low self esteem and socially exclusion. Their parents also feel the effects through pester power, the guilt of not being able to buy their children the latest brands or by financially struggling to provide these brands for their children. (Roper & Shah 2006)

Late Majority and Laggards:

Fashion does not stay for long, and people who are in the segment of late majorities and laggards in the fashion cycle are usually the target of those who are the innovators and early majority. Everett's Diffusion of Innovation categorizes the victims clearly.



Diffusion of Innovation (Everett 1962)

Growing Impact of Media:

The growing reach of media has facilitated brands world over to reach wider set of customers at much higher pace. The growth of internet and social communities like Facebook and Orkut has really made teenagers more familiar with the fashion world. There is a great influence of celebrities that include people from the film industry, sportsperson, socialites etc. Teenagers see these icons as their idols and they desire to wear what their idols wear. Brands continue to systematically exploit their fascination with their appearance and, recognize the enormous buying power of young adolescents, they have turned their spotlight on this lucrative and impressionable market segment.

Brands targeting Young Consumers:

The fashion industry players are seeing the young customers as very easy targets that is the reason many world leading brands like UCB & Reebok has separate lines

for the young consumers. As a result of which the teenagers are becoming more brand conscious.

After Effects: an Expert's View

From an interview conducted with Dr Mamta Patel, an eminent homeopath and psychologist in New Delhi, some after effects of bullying on health were identified:

Young people are falling into depression because they are unable to cope up with the pace of fashion and its innovators. They are bullied upon for what they are and how they present themselves, which leads to low self esteem, exclusion from social situations, restlessness, insomnia and this in turn affects a person's family and work life. Such people get over conscious for their looks and they are pulled out of their group because they are not dressed up to the mark. This gives an inferiority complex, endowing a feeling that they are living a useless life. They feel jealous of their friends and insecure in their relationship with the fear that their loved ones might leave them. In some of cases the problems get even more severe as the immune system of body weakens by which the victim's body becomes prone to various diseases.

Primary Research

The study was conducted on students of different age group, for which the sample size was 200. Also, focus group interviews were conducted and it was noticeable that the victims felt hesitant to discuss those incidents. Some of them did not even want to disclose their identities.

Shruti, a post graduate student suffered from clinical depression because she got highly obese due to hormonal imbalance in her late school days. Due to this, she was unable to wear fashionable clothes and her peers used to tease her a lot unknowingly the hereditary disease. She had a belief in her mind that people judge everyone by looks and dressing sense, as a consequence she thought that her peers find her boring and dumb and she stopped hanging around with them also. Shruti stopped socializing with everyone and locked herself in her home for a year. She used to feel inferior from her best friend because she was beautiful then her and could fit into fashionable clothes. She even felt insecure in her love relationship. Gradually she came out of depression after a lot of counseling and medical treatments with the support of her family. She accepted that she used to feel jealous a lot from her best friend and gained inferiority complex.

Neha (name changed), 19 is a short and plump person from East India. She recalled an instance instantly when asked about any such humiliation case. At her young age, a guy followed her just to make fun of her, because she was wearing fashionable attire. She ignored this at that time but felt very bad later and decided to change her sense of clothing to more conservative one.

Bhawika, 19 was teased a lot by her friends in her school days because she was not able to afford branded stuff like others in her group. She made an effort to work along with studies to earn extra pocket money by taking home tuitions so that she does not stand out of the place.

Saloni (name changed) had to wear braces on her teeth for 2 years, and she stopped smiling because she got very conscious as her classmates started laughing at her. She was an introvert in her adolescence and people used to hit her emotionally on this personality trait. As the cost of braces was really high, she did not

demand branded stuff from her parents and because of her simple dresses, her highly esteemed peer group used to verbally bully her by calling her with weird names.

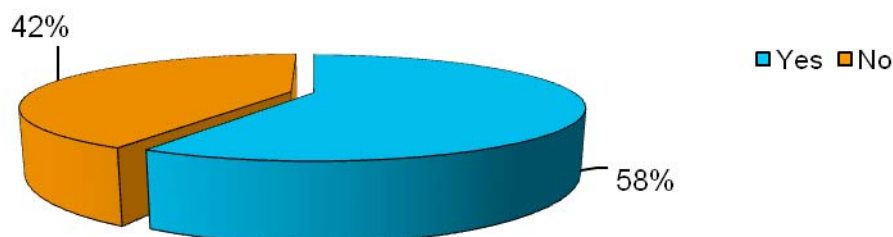
Ayesha (name changed) stays lonely outside her home when a bunch of kids of her age group plays together and never invite her to join them. The reason is that she cannot afford to appropriate branded clothing like them.

Rahul don't have any friends and he is being physically bullied by his classmates because of his shabby dressing sense.

The sufferers are of different characteristics in different regions of world. Here in India people are being bullied for not wearing proper attire, however in the European, US and UK culture the victims are those set of people who wearing high end brands.

A questionnaire based research was also conducted in school and colleges located in Delhi and NCR regions. Out of 200 respondents, 106 respondents accepted that they have been bullied on the basis of apparels they wear.

Have you ever been insulted or embarrassed in regard to apparels you dress in?



Out of these 106 respondents majority were females. Only 36% of males have ever suffered bullying as compared to 64% of women. Thus young females are more prone to fashion bullying than young males. The research also revealed that people with low annual income suffers more from such cases than people with high annual income. Almost 85% of respondents in annual income bracket of below INR 2,50,000 (5000\$) have suffered from bullying, on the other hand only 35% of respondents in annual income bracket of more than INR 10,00,000 (20,000\$) have suffered from bullying. This is because lower income people cannot afford to buy branded apparels.

An attempt was also made in the research to look at the personality traits of the bullying victims. For this, five personalities of all respondents were measured as given in "Five Factor Model". (L L Thurstone). The Big Five factors and their constituent traits can be summarized as follows:

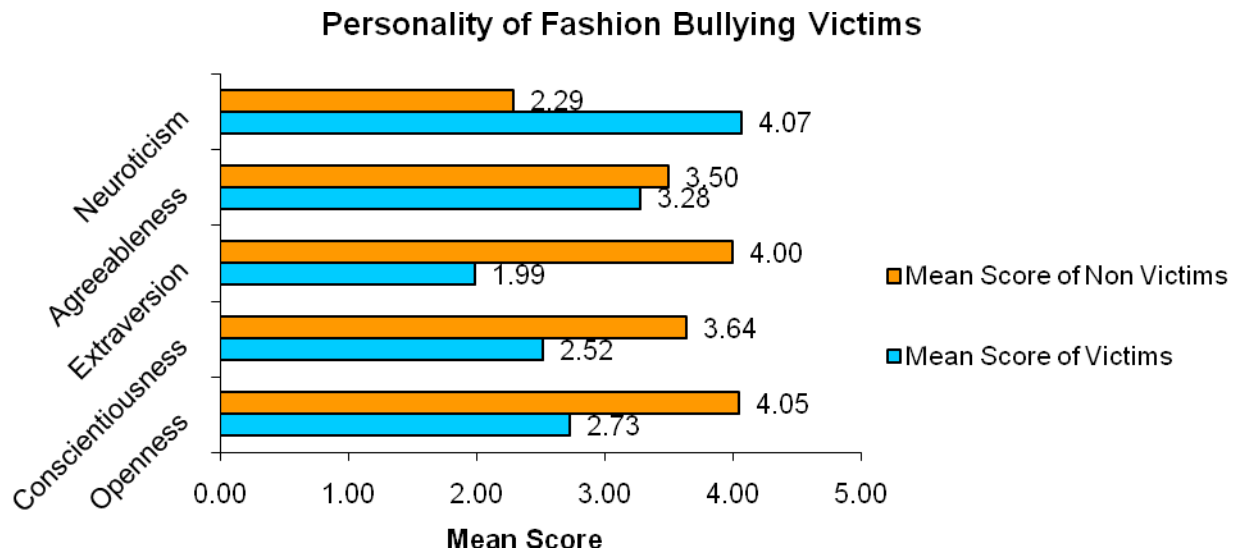
Openness - Appreciation for art, emotion, adventure, unusual ideas, imagination, curiosity, and variety of experience.

Conscientiousness - A tendency to show self-discipline, act dutifully, and aim for achievement, planned rather than spontaneous behavior.

Extraversion - Energy, positive emotions, surgency, and the tendency to seek stimulation and the company of others.

Agreeableness - A tendency to be compassionate and cooperative rather than suspicious and antagonistic towards others.

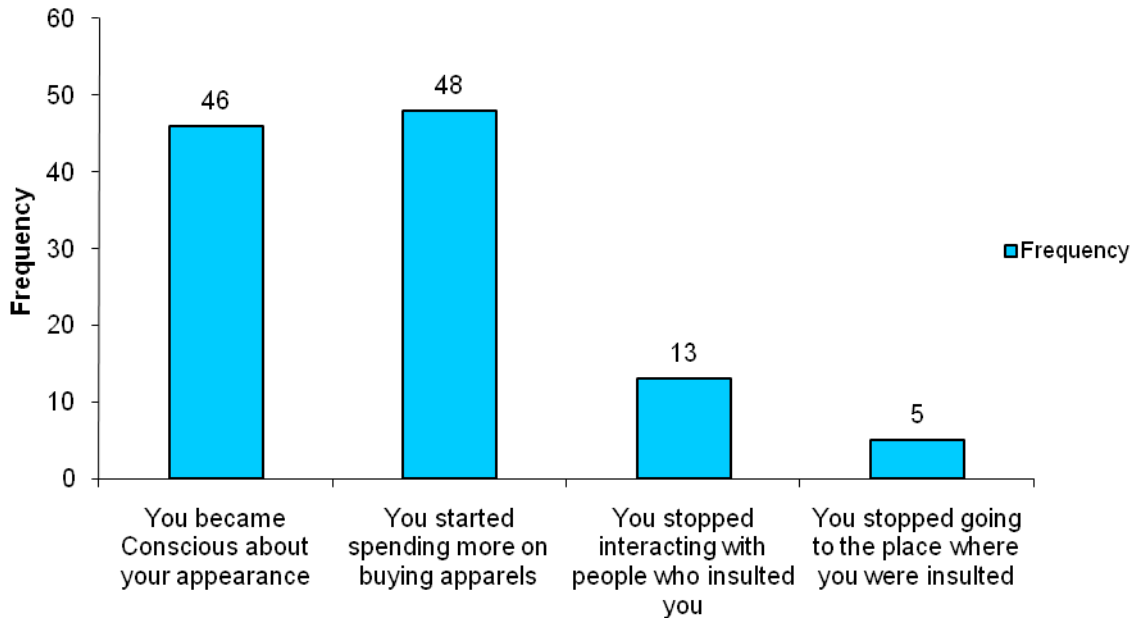
Neuroticism - A tendency to experience unpleasant emotions easily, such as anger, anxiety, depression, or vulnerability; sometimes called emotional instability.



As anticipated, the mean score of Fashion bullying victims was low on Extroversion, Openness, and Conscientiousness. The victims scored much higher on Neuroticism. Such people don't like to interact with anyone, they don't have good imagination, they don't follow a planned schedule, they don't understand things easily and they get disturbed very easily.

Bullying is very common in colleges and it is primarily done through usage of abusive words. In case of young males bullying sometime also lead to physical violence.

What Changes came in your life because of Bullying?



Majority of victims ignores bullying at the time when they are insulted or abused but they feel really bad later on. Only 30% of victims get involved into arguments, others ignore it straight away. In case of young males, 22% of victims involve into physical violence while none of the female respondent replied with violence. The most severe impact of fashion bullying is when a student stops going into the school or college where he or she was bullied, 4.3% of respondents reacted in similar way, whereas 42% of victims started spending more on buying apparels so that they can be counted as more fashionable.

Results and Discussions

Through research, an attempt was made to test following hypothesis:

- Females are more prone to fashion bullying.

Hypothesis was proved true through the research, as 64% of females have suffered from fashion bullying by one way or another as compared to 36% of males.

- Low income individuals are the prime targets of fashion bullies.

The hypothesis was accurate as 85% of respondents earning below \$ 5000 annually have suffered from fashion bullying.

- Victims of fashion bullying are introverts and shy individuals.

The hypothesis came out to be true, as it was found out in the survey that fashion bullying victims are low on extroversion, openness, and conscientiousness in survey.

- Bullying is primarily done through verbal language.

The hypothesis was rejected as 10% of respondents who have suffered from fashion bullying, accepted that they were physically beaten while bullying.

- Bullying makes victims more conscious of their looks.

The hypothesis was accepted as 43% of victims accepted that they started spending more on purchasing apparels after bullying.

The first objective of research was to investigate and analyze how different victims of bullying react and muddle through these situations. We came to know through research that bullying is primarily done to those individuals who cannot afford to buy expensive apparels. It is more common in females as compared to males. The cases

of bullying is slightly less in schools than colleges, that's because in India all the schools have standardized uniforms and students have to wear those only. Usage of abusive words is most frequently used medium used for bullying. Girls tend to ignore such situations but boys respond in much stronger manner they get into arguments or sometimes even get involved in physical violence.

The second objective of research was to draw a relationship between the personality traits of the victims and how they cope up. The research revealed that individuals who score high on neuroticism and agreeableness tends to ignore the insulting word but they feel really bad about it which leads to certain disorders, on the other hands individuals who score high on openness and extraversion reacts immediately under such situations, they either get into arguments or sometime even get physically violent.

The research clearly proves that fashion has such a powerful influence on teenagers, the question then arises that why not harness rather than try to fight that power? Lessons in history, culture, economics, applied mathematics, geography, chemistry and genetics are all woven into the shirt on your back. The middle schools and colleges must have programs to help teenagers, who are in a phase of defining their identity and coping with the detrimental effects of being ostracized by fashion bullies. Fashion bullying, most of the time, comes in the form of verbal and emotional abuse. Program that teach children the proper way to respond to taunts especially when it involves the clothes they wear will help prevent a full blown bullying incident from happening in the future (Nizar & Rahman). The program will not be able to

eradicate fashion based bullying all together from schools but what it can do is give children the tools that can help them defend themselves.

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