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The Interplay of Dehumanization, Shame and Guilt as Predictors of Self-Dehumanization Among University Students

Sahil Jilowa, Pinki, Nisha,
Guru Jambheshwar University of Science & Technology, Hisar.

Shashi Rashmi,
Maharshi Dayanand University, Rohtak, Haryana.

Rakesh Kumar Behmani,
Guru Jambheshwar University of Science & Technology, Hisar.

The present study investigates the predictive relationship between dehumanization, shame and guilt, and self-dehumanization among university students. A total of 400 participants (310 females and 90 males) age ranges from 17 to 32 years from rural (n = 172) and urban (n = 228) localities were assessed using standardized scales. Descriptive statistics revealed moderate levels of all three psychological constructs across the sample. The correlation analysis showed significant positive associations between dehumanization and self-dehumanization ($r = .689$, $p < .01$), dehumanization and shame/ guilt ($r = .832$, $p < .01$), and shame/guilt and self-dehumanization ($r = .634$, $p < .01$), indicating a strong interconnectedness among these variables. Further, regression analysis indicated that dehumanization and shame/guilt significantly predicted self-dehumanization, with an R^2 of .486, suggesting that approximately 48.6% of the variance in self-dehumanization is explained by these two predictors. The overall model was statistically significant ($R = .697$, *Adjusted* $R^2 = .484$, $SE = 12.99$), confirming the substantial impact of both variables on self-dehumanization. These findings highlight the critical role of interpersonal and intrapersonal negative experiences—specifically feelings of dehumanization and internalized shame and guilt—in contributing to the self-dehumanization process among young adults. The results underscore the need for psychological interventions aimed at reducing these experiences, particularly among vulnerable groups.

Keywords: dehumanization, shame and guilt, self-dehumanization

Dehumanization

Dehumanization refers to the cognitive and emotional processes that deny people or communities full human dignity. This can include viewing others as things or animals, depriving them of the characteristics that distinguish humans, such as identity, agency, and moral worth (Haslam, 2006).

Dehumanization is rooted in a variety of historical and theoretical contexts. It has been used throughout history to legitimize slavery, colonialism, genocide, and other types of systemic brutality and oppression (Kelman, 2017). For example, during the Holocaust, Jews were portrayed as vermin, allowing for their systematic annihilation (Staub, 1989). It is theoretically explained by theories such as Social Identity Theory, which proposes that in-group favouring and out-group derogation can lead to the dehumanization of out-groups to retain a positive social identity (Tajfel & Turner, 2003; Rashmi & Shafiq, 2016).

Dehumanization employs numerous psychological mechanisms. Moral disengagement is a basic technique that

permits people to detach themselves from the ethical implications of their conduct toward others (Bandura, 1999). Individuals who dehumanize others might justify cruelty and violence without feeling guilty or empathetic. Another strategy is the denial of mental states, in which dehumanized individuals are considered to lack complex emotions, thoughts, and intentions, hence allowing their mistreatment (Leyens et al., 2001).

Dehumanization refers to the notion that a group of individuals resembles animals rather than humans (Haslam, 2006; Hodson et al., 2012; Kumar, 2025; Leyens et al., 2000). This can include objectification, mechanization, and de-individualization (Barnard, 2001; Haslam, 2006; Nussbaum, 1999).

Dehumanization has gotten limited attention in scientific literature. Classical psychology theories often view dehumanization as a source of conflict between individuals or groups. It is a form of ethical exclusion that involve underprivileged people are rejected their essential humanity and deemed unworthy of compassionate treatment (Opotow 1990, 1996). This is a psychological technique that permits people to overlook their natural barriers to harm others. Dehumanized people are less worthy of moral treatment (Bandura 1999, 2002). Adolescents are individuals who are in the stage of development between childhood and adulthood; they can also be dehumanized by their peer groups (Rashmi, 2023).

Dehumanization is a form of delegitimization where a group is labeled as non-human, like "savages" or "monsters." This makes it easier to justify extreme aggression against them and prevents conflicts from being resolved (Bar-Tal, 1989). Sometimes, sexual minorities also face dehumanization by their society members without any reason (Jilowa et al., 2024).

Struch and Schwartz (1989) believe that dehumanizing judgments stem from observed between-group variations in prosocial ideals or ethics. They revealed that conflict between groups is associated which have greater beliefs of an outgroup's absence of or assault on pro-social values, which will increase the support for detrimental outgroup behaviour. When you dehumanize someone, it's simpler to rationalize being mean or violent toward them (Jilowa et al., 2025).

However, modern theories suggest that dehumanization can also be more subtle, especially when there isn't major conflict between groups. For example, people often see their own group as more "human" compared to others. This belief means that groups considered less human, or lacking in traits that distinguish people from animals, are seen as less civilized and more animal-like (Haslam, 2006; Leyens et al., 2000, 2001; Rashmi, 2016). Sometimes the working women also face the dehumanization that affects their mental health and their adjustment (Rashmi & Shafiq, 2017)

Infra Humanization theory may be the most influential attribute-based explanation of dehumanization (Leyens et al., 2000, 2001). This focuses on the assignment of particular individual emotions to the ingroup vs the outgroup, discriminating between primary and secondary emotions. Secondary emotions (which include empathy, regret and blame) are commonly regarded to be more advanced levels and unique to humans. Primary emotions, on the other hand, are thought to be primitive in nature and encompass feelings shared by humans and other animals (Demoulin et al., 2004).

Shame & Guilt

The feeling that one has done something wrong or has fallen shy of an expected standard of behaviour can give rise to the complicated and multidimensional emotion of

guilt. It frequently comes with regret, shame, and self-reproach sentiments. An individual's relationships, decision-making, and psychological health can all be significantly impacted by guilt. Distress, low self-esteem, strained relationships, and skewed decision-making are examples of psychological impacts. Acceptance, self-reflection, apologizing, asking for help, and forgiving are all part of coping. Emotional health and personal development are positively impacted by acknowledging and dealing with guilt.

According to a commonly used definition, guilt is defined as an unpleasant feeling that develops when someone causes or feels they have caused harm to another; in other cases, there may have been a transgression of moral or societal norms or internalized beliefs (Carnì et al., 2013; Malti, 2016; Tilghman-Osborne, Cole & Felton, 2010) According to Tilghman-Osborne (2012), Tension, regret, and regretfulness for a specific deed or inaction are the hallmarks of the emotion known as guilt. Guilt includes a cognitive component because it assumes that one is to blame for the bad conduct or omission.

Ward, (2014) made an effort to investigate the relationship between shame and guilt and psychologically healthy expressions such as self-esteem in adult Irish people. 110 adults made up the sample. The results indicate that when emotions of guilt and shame escalate, they also affect levels of social connectedness and self-worth. There was not a noticeable gender disparity in terms of social connectivity, shame, guilt, or self-esteem. The findings support earlier studies that suggested the detrimental effects of shame and guilt (emotions) on a person's sense of self-worth and social connections.

The association between self-compassion, self-esteem, shame-proneness, and guilt-proneness with feeling ashamed and guilty after remembering flaws and offences was investigated by Saeedi et al. (2012). There were eighty University of Tehran participants. The results showed that these emotions had a negative correlation with self-compassion and a positive correlation with shame-proneness. While guilt-proneness did not significantly correlate with the emotions, shame did demonstrate a negative association with self-esteem.

Self-Dehumanization

Self-dehumanization refers to the internal process by which individuals perceive themselves as lacking in essential human qualities, such as autonomy, emotional depth, moral agency, and individuality (Bastian & Haslam, 2011). Unlike interpersonal dehumanization, where others are viewed as less human, self-dehumanization is an inwardly directed phenomenon where individuals see themselves as mechanical, animal-like, or morally deficient. This self-perception often arises in response to chronic exposure to dehumanizing environments, such as violence, abuse, marginalization, or systemic oppression.

Types of Self-Dehumanization

Based on Haslam's (2006) gives the dual model of dehumanization in which he conceptualized that self-dehumanization can be divided in two forms:

- Animalistic self-dehumanization: viewing oneself as lacking civility, refinement, or higher cognition—traits that separate humans from animals.
- Mechanistic self-dehumanization: seeing oneself as robotic, cold, inert, or lacking emotional warmth and agency.

These self-perceptions can deeply undermine a person's self-worth, dignity, and psychological functioning. Research suggests that self-dehumanization is often a reaction to experiences of shame, guilt, and

objectification (Moller & Deci, 2009). Victims of abuse, war, bullying, or chronic discrimination may internalize the degrading messages they receive and begin to see themselves as less than human. For instance, emotional abuse can erode an individual's self-concept, leading to feelings of worthlessness and a belief that they are not deserving of empathy or dignity (Haslam & Loughnan, 2014).

In addition, individuals in oppressive or highly controlling environments may lose a sense of autonomy and personal identity, contributing to mechanistic self-dehumanization (Bastian & Crimston, 2014). The suppression of agency and emotional expression—common in workplaces with rigid hierarchies or in relationships marked by emotional manipulation—may foster internalized dehumanization.

Self-dehumanization has profound implications for mental health and behavior. It is linked with increased levels of depression, anxiety, dissociation, and self-harm. People who perceive themselves as less human may also disengage morally, feeling less responsible for their actions or less worthy of ethical treatment (Bandura, 1999).

Further, self-dehumanization can impair social functioning by undermining empathy, trust, and relationship satisfaction. Individuals may isolate themselves or struggle with intimacy, believing they are undeserving of love or respect (Kteily et al., 2016). It can also exacerbate cycles of abuse or victimization by reducing the likelihood of seeking help or asserting one's rights. Cultural factors play a significant role in the development of self-dehumanization. In collectivist societies, where social harmony and conformity are emphasized, individuals who deviate from norms (e.g., due to disability, gender nonconformity, or socioeconomic status) may be subtly devalued, leading to internalized feelings of inferiority (Kim et al., 2012). Additionally, societal discourses that stigmatize certain groups (e.g., migrants, people with mental illness) can foster a climate in which self-dehumanization becomes a shared psychological burden.

Objectives

1. To study the correlation between Dehumanization and shame & Guilt
2. To study the correlation between Dehumanization and Self Dehumanization
3. To study the correlation between Shame & Guilt and Self Dehumanization
4. To Study the impact of Dehumanization on Self Dehumanization
5. To Study the impact of Shame & Guilt on Self Dehumanization

Hypotheses

H_1. There shall be a significant correlation between Dehumanization and shame & Guilt

H_2. There shall be a significant correlation between Dehumanization and Self Dehumanization

H_3. There shall be a significant correlation between Shame & Guilt and Self Dehumanization

H_4. There shall be significant impact of Dehumanization on Self Dehumanization

H_5. There shall be significant impact of Shame & Guilt on Self Dehumanization

Method

Sample

A total of 400 university-going students, aged 17 to 32, make up the sample for this

study. Those who were willing to engage in the study were chosen from Guru Jambheshwar University of Science and Technology in Hisar, Haryana, India. The following inclusion and exclusion criteria were used in the sample selection process.

Tools

Experience of Dehumanization Measurement (Golossenko et al., 2023): This Scale was created by Artyom Golossenko et al., 2023. EDHM scale consists of 10 items rated on a 5-point scale (1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = neutral, 4 = agree and 5 = strongly agree). All the 10 items are positive on this scale. Construct Reliability indicates the internal consistency range from 0.91 to 0.96. Higher scores might indicate a greater experience of dehumanization.

Shame and Guilt Scale (Barbara, 1999): Guilt will be measured with the help of the Shame and Guilt Scale (SGS; Alexander et al., 1999) it consists of a list of 10 items that assess guilt (5 items) and shame (5 items). It is a 5-point rating scale and scoring is done from "1 = not at all upset, 2 = Slightly upset, 3 = Somewhat Upset, 4 = Quite upset, 5 = Very upset". The measure has demonstrated high levels of internal consistency, convergent and discriminant validity, and predictive validity. Cronbach's alpha reliability for the guilt scale was 0.79.

Self-Dehumanization Scale (Morgan L. Robison, 2023): This Scale was created by MORGAN L. ROBISON, 2023. The scale consists of 25 items, of which 19 are positive items and 6 are negative items rated on a 7-point scale. For Positive items, the scoring is done from 'Completely Disagree' to 'Completely Agree', and for negative items, the scoring is done from 'Completely Agree' to 'Completely Disagree'. The Corfficient alpha for this scale was 0.86.

Procedure

Before administering the questionnaires, participants were provided with a clear explanation of what's the aim of the study, assuring them of the voluntary nature of participation, confidentiality of their responses, and they are having their right to withdraw at any stage without any consequences. From every participant the informed consent was taken. The questionnaires were administered in small group settings in classrooms, libraries, or counselling centres, depending on availability and convenience. Each participant received a questionnaire, which included demographic details (covering age, gender, and locality) followed by the three standardised scales. The instructions for filling out each scale were given clearly, and the researcher was present to clarify any doubts without influencing the responses. Participants were instructed to respond honestly and were assured that there were no right or wrong answers. The average time taken to complete all questionnaires was approximately 25–30 minutes. Care was taken to maintain a quiet and non-distracting environment during the filling out process to ensure focused responses. SPSS (26) was used to analyse the data once it was collected. The discussion section discusses the findings.

Results

Table 1 displays the descriptive statistics, such as the mean, standard deviation (SD), standard error of the mean (SE), and N (total sample size) for the psychological variables measured in the study—Dehumanization, Self-Dehumanization, and Shame & Guilt—among university students. The table shows the participants' mean score on Dehumanization was 22.13 (SD = 9.10, SE = 0.455), indicating a moderate level of perceived dehumanization in the sample. The mean score for Self-Dehumanization was 57.34 (SD = 18.08, SE = 0.904), suggesting

a relatively higher and more varied internalization of dehumanizing experiences among the participants. In contrast, the mean score for Shame & Guilt was 24.19 (SD = 9.41, SE = 0.470), reflecting a moderate emotional impact in terms of guilt and shame.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics

Variables	N	Mean	S.E.	S.D.
Dehumanization	400	22.1250	.45493	9.09870
Self-Dehumanization	400	57.3350	.90402	18.08038
Shame & Guilt	400	24.1850	.47048	9.40968

Table 2 displays the inter correlation matrix among the variables: Dehumanization, Shame & Guilt, and Self-Dehumanization. The correlation between the variables mentioned above is evaluated using the Pearson product-moment correlation. All correlations reported are statistically significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed), denoted by "**". A strong positive correlation was found between Dehumanization and Shame & Guilt (r = .832, p < .01), indicating that participants who experienced higher levels of dehumanization also reported elevated feelings of shame and guilt. Similarly, a moderate to strong positive correlation was observed between Dehumanization and Self-Dehumanization (r = .689, p < .01), suggesting that those who felt dehumanized by others were more likely to internalize such experiences and perceive themselves in a dehumanized manner. Additionally, the correlation between Shame & Guilt and Self-Dehumanization was also moderately strong and positive (r = .634, p < .01), implying that individuals experiencing higher levels of shame and guilt were more likely to exhibit self-dehumanizing thoughts or behaviours. These significant positive associations collectively highlight a closely interconnected relationship among the three psychological constructs, with dehumanization playing a central predictive role in both the emotional (shame and guilt) and internalized (self-dehumanization) experiences of the participants.

Table 2. Correlation matrix for dehumanization, shame & guilt, self-dehumanization

Variables	Dehumanization	Shame & Guilt	Self-Dehumanization
Dehumanization	1		
Shame & Guilt	.832**	1	
Self-Dehumanization	.689**	.634**	1

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level

Table 3 depicts the stepwise regression for Dehumanization and Shame & Guilt which is used to assess the impact of Dehumanization and Shame & Guilt on Self-Dehumanization of the university going students.

Model 1 includes Dehumanization as the sole predictor. The results indicate that Dehumanization alone explains approximately 47.4% of the variance in Self-Dehumanization ($R^2 = .474$, $F = 358.913$, $p < .001$), with a standard error of estimate of 13.13. This implies that individuals who experience higher levels of dehumanization from others are significantly more likely to internalize those experiences and perceive themselves in a dehumanized way.

Model 2 adds Shame & Guilt to Dehumanization as a second predictor. With this addition, the model accounts for 48.6% of the variance in Self-Dehumanization ($R^2 = .486$, $F = 187.901$, $p < .001$), showing a slight improvement in explanatory power. The adjusted R^2 value increases to .484, indicating that the addition of Shame & Guilt adds meaningful predictive value beyond Dehumanization alone. The incremental R^2 increase from .474 to .486 suggests that Shame & Guilt, while not as strong a predictor as Dehumanization, still contributes significantly to explaining the variance in Self-Dehumanization.

Table 3. Stepwise regression analysis for dehumanization and shame & guilt

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	F	Sig.
1	.689[a]	.474	.473	13.12717	358.913	.000[a]
2	.697[b]	.486	.484	12.99152	187.901	.000[b]

a. Predictors: (Constant), Dehumanization

b. Predictors: (Constant), Dehumanization, Shame & Guilt

c. Dependent Variable: Self-Dehumanization

Discussion

The results of the study show how the experiences of dehumanization, shame and guilt, and self-dehumanization are connected among university students. Table 2 presents the relationships between these three variables using a statistical method called Pearson correlation. This method helps us understand whether the variables move together and how strongly they are related. All the correlations found were statistically significant at the 0.01 level, meaning the results are highly reliable.

A very strong positive relationship was found between dehumanization and shame & guilt, with a correlation value of 0.832. This means that students who felt dehumanized by others also tended to feel more ashamed or guilty. Similarly, there was a moderately strong positive relationship between dehumanization and self-dehumanization, with a correlation of 0.689. This indicates that when students experienced dehumanization from others, they were more likely to adopt those negative views about themselves. Additionally, the correlation between shame & guilt and self-dehumanization was 0.634, also a moderately strong positive relationship, showing that students who felt more shame and guilt were more likely to dehumanize themselves.

These findings suggest that these three psychological experiences—feeling dehumanized by others, experiencing shame and guilt, and then turning those feelings inward—are closely linked. Dehumanization seems to play a key role, influencing both the emotional responses (shame and guilt) and the internalization process (self-dehumanization).

Table 3 takes this further by using a stepwise regression analysis to determine how much dehumanization and shame & guilt can predict or explain self-dehumanization. In the first model, only dehumanization was considered. This model revealed that dehumanization alone explained about 47.4% of the variation in students' self-dehumanization. This means that nearly half of how much students dehumanize themselves can be linked to how much they feel dehumanized by others. The result was statistically significant, which supports the reliability of this finding.

In the second model, shame and guilt were added along with dehumanization. This improved the model slightly, increasing the explained variation in self-dehumanization to 48.6%. While this change is small, it shows that shame and guilt also play a meaningful role in predicting self-dehumanization, although not as strongly as dehumanization itself. The increase in the adjusted R square value from 0.473 to 0.484 confirms that adding shame and guilt improved the prediction.

Overall, the results clearly show that students who experience more dehumanization tend to feel more shame and guilt, and are more likely to internalize these

experiences and view themselves negatively. Dehumanization emerges as the most powerful predictor, but shame and guilt also contribute to how individuals come to dehumanize themselves. These insights highlight the emotional and psychological impact of being treated as less than human, and how such experiences can deeply affect one's self-image.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the findings reveal a strong connection between being dehumanized, feeling shame and guilt, and developing self-dehumanizing thoughts. Students who face dehumanizing experiences are more likely to struggle with negative emotions and internalize these experiences in harmful ways. Among the variables studied, dehumanization stands out as the most influential factor in shaping self-perception, though shame and guilt also contribute. Together, these results emphasize the serious emotional toll of dehumanizing treatment and its potential to damage how individuals view themselves.

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Sahil Jilowa, Research Scholar, Department of Applied Psychology, Guru Jambheshwar University of Science & Technology, Hisar. Email: rs230110091002@gjust.org

Pinki, Research Scholar, Department of Applied Psychology, Guru Jambheshwar University of Science & Technology, Hisar. Email: pinkikataria2020@gmail.com

Nisha, Research Scholar, Department of Applied Psychology, Guru Jambheshwar University of Science & Technology, Hisar. Email: bhukkalnisha@gmail.com

Shashi Rashmi, Assistant Professor, Department of Psychology, Maharshi Dayanand University, Rohtak, Haryana. Email: drshashi.psy@mdurohtak.ac.in

Rakesh Kumar Behmani, Professor, Department of Applied Psychology, Guru Jambheshwar University of Science & Technology, Hisar. Email: rakeshgjust@gmail.com