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Self-Conscious Emotions and Mental Health: Associations of Shame and Guilt with Depressive and Anxiety Symptoms among Albanian University Students

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Abstract

Background: Shame and guilt are self-conscious emotions that differ in their focus and potential psychological consequences. Shame involves a global negative evaluation of the self, whereas guilt is more closely related to specific behaviors. Both emotions have been associated with psychological difficulties, although shame has generally shown stronger associations with internalizing symptoms.

Aims: The present study aimed to examine the statistical associations of shame and guilt with depressive and anxiety symptoms among Albanian university students and to determine the unique statistical contribution of each emotion to these psychological outcomes.

Study Design: A quantitative, cross-sectional study.

Methods: A quantitative, cross-sectional correlational study was conducted with 459 university students aged 18–24 years from four public universities in Albania. Shame and guilt were assessed using the Test of Self-Conscious Affect–3 (TOSCA-3), while anxiety and depressive symptoms were assessed using the Clinical Outcomes in Routine Evaluation–Outcome Measure (CORE-OM). Descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation analyses, and two multiple linear regression analyses were conducted. Pearson correlation analyses were used to examine bivariate associations among shame, guilt, anxiety symptoms, and depressive symptoms, while separate multiple linear regression analyses examined the statistical

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contribution of shame and guilt to depressive and anxiety symptoms.

Results: Pearson correlation analyses showed that shame was positively associated with both depressive and anxiety symptoms. Guilt was also positively associated with both outcomes, although these associations were weaker than those observed for shame. Subsequent multiple linear regression analyses showed that shame and guilt together accounted for 15.3% of the variance in depressive symptoms and 14.7% of the variance in anxiety symptoms. In the depressive symptoms model, shame made a significant positive unique statistical contribution after accounting for the shared variance between shame and guilt, whereas guilt did not. In the anxiety symptoms model, shame made the stronger unique statistical contribution, while guilt made a small and marginally significant positive unique statistical contribution. Given the cross-sectional design, these associations should not be interpreted as evidence of causal or temporal relationships.

Conclusion: The findings indicate that shame showed a stronger and more consistent statistical association and unique contribution to depressive and anxiety symptoms than guilt among Albanian university students. The findings highlight the relevance of shame and negative self-evaluation when considering psychological symptoms in university populations. However, given the cross-sectional design, the observed associations and statistical contributions cannot be interpreted as evidence of causal or temporal relationships.

Keywords: mental health, shame; guilt; depressive symptoms; anxiety symptoms; university students; Albania.