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An Experience of Body Shaming

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Abstract

The aim of this research is mainly to explore the experiences of those who become the victim of body shaming among students in tertiary level such as in university. This research is using the qualitative method towards five university students who were having the body shaming experience in their life. All the research data were taken based on half structured interview. For data collection, researchers rely on semi-structured interview techniques to achieve data saturation. From that, the study findings were analysed manually using a thematic method that began with open coding, progressed through category coding, and culminated in developing themes. Based on this research, all the body shaming victims concluded that this kind of attitude is like an insult to their bodies. As one way to help them overcoming this, they need moral supports from their parents, friends and professionals. The power action strategy that has been used in handling body shaming including the cognitive and behavioural strategies. Body shaming also gives a good and bad impact towards the victims. All the information from this research will help those counsellors and professionals to come up with a cure plan to help the body shaming victims. Since this research is a preliminary research, the next researcher is encouraged to do some research in getting a deeper knowledge especially in the aspect of cultural, helping hands and new methodology of various researches. To sum up, body shaming is depending on the way the victims accept this kind of humiliation in their life.

Keywords: Body Shaming, Bully, Qualitative, Phenomology, Thematic Analysis

Introduction

In the 21st century, the technology, social media and mass media are well developed and it's really influenced the community and it becomes a trend that has been advertised (Jung aret al., 2022). This issue can be easily identified by the way of life among teenagers especially the university students. In this age, there is research stating that adolescents will face dramatic and challenges such as body shapes changes, cognitively, emotionally and socially (Elfitasari & Winta, 2022; Guindon, 2009).

Nowadays, in the mass media, advertisements about the ideal body shape are often shown. As such, it has encouraged individuals to create ideal body standards as shown in the advertisement. Some ads always show men and women with body shapes that are believed to be the ideal standard. In women, it is described as someone who has a slender body, thighs, waist, slender hips, and long legs, and fine white skin. Meanwhile, in men, it is described as someone who has a slender, muscular, and healthy body shape (Sari & Rosyidah, 2020). As today we can get some proofs from the Magazines and Instagrams pages that portray the desired body shape, we tend to question ourselves by comparing our bodies to the digitally altered ones, so from here all the comments are made on the physical aspects of an individual's body, but the real impacts are directly towards the psychological state of the individual themselves (Saxena et al., 2020).

Among the causes of body shaming symptoms is that society has been indoctrinated with such things and even makes it a standard thing in life so that those who have an ideal standard body will look more perfect while having a thin and fat body is an optional. The issue of body shaming in our society is not a new or foreign issue nowadays, especially among teenagers where at that age they really want a stylish, beautiful appearance and have an ideal and attractive body posture (Shah, 2021). They are more likely to discuss lifestyle from the aspects of beauty, body and overall personal health. Individuals who are in line with the passage of time will feel themselves more perfect than other individuals. For instance, with the advent of the 'influencers' concept in social media and rampant preaching about the way one should look make them more and more getting sucked into the idea of the 'ideal body'. This kind of influence may lead to unhealthy expectations of body shape among the body shaming victims (Gam et al., 2020).

It is even worst when this individual begins to label and express something negative to an individual who is less than perfect, especially from the physical aspect of the body, this will continue until the occurrence of verbal bullying, that is, bullying of one's body. For instance, when a person meets his friend and greets each other, then personal and physical appearance becomes an assessment or gossip. Some conversations that can be thrown like "Oh my god! You are getting fatter now", "Wow! after a long vacation your stomach is getting bloated" or other expressions that sound like mocking someone's body, then this sometimes has a bad effect on one's emotions and self so that they are willing to act out of control.

Body shaming is a feeling of shameful about the shape or part of the body caused by the evaluation of others as well as self-evaluation (Frederikson, 1998). Chaplin (2005) stated that body shaming is also an act of criticizing or criticizing of the shape, size and physical appearance of others. It is a form of verbal violence in which this verbal criticism can cause trauma as a result of hurtful or unpleasant words (Brigitta, 2018). Dolezal (2015) argues that, body shaming not only involves verbal violence, but also involves non-verbal activities. This act provides an embarrassing experience among its victims so as to have a negative effect that disrupts thought patterns, gives rise to negative self-evaluation as well as makes the victim traumatized (Matos, 2013; Eva, 2016).

In the context of tertiary level students, individuals who face body shaming feel dissatisfied with their own bodies. The result of this dissatisfaction is that they are not confident with their own appearance, thus interfering with the routine of dietary practices (Ko, 2010). Moreira (2017) also found that the attitudes of body shaming victims also changed and caused their daily lives to become messed up. This confusion causes is mainly from weight-related awareness. They become very embarrassed by being overweight and feel themselves very different compared to others. Since tertiary level students are very concerned about their

appearance, the purpose of this study is to explore the experiences of victims of body shaming among students of the higher education level.

This study was conducted to explore the subjective experiences of respondents and their interpretations of the experiences they went through. The questions asked in the interviews were semi-structured in order to do a survey of the experience in body shaming among students of tertiary level (IPT). Next, another objective of this study is to identify other issues either internal or external in nature that are related to the personal experiences of victims who face symptoms of body shaming.

Methodology

This study takes the form of a qualitative study because qualitative research allows the individuals studied to narrate their feelings and experiences using their own words (Cresswell & Poth, 2016; Bryman 2008; Padgett 2008). In qualitative design, the most appropriate approach for this study is the phenomenological approach as it is a research method used to understand the daily experiences of individuals (Haliza & Shamsudin 2014), coinciding with this study which aims to explore the experience of being a victim of body shaming among students at the tertiary level (IPT)

As this study is a phenomenological study and in the preliminary stage, the researcher involved only five (5) victims selected based on the following criteria: (i) the victim has experience related to body shaming and (ii) is studying at the tertiary level (IPT). At the initial stage of the study, researchers have contacted five participants from the public universities (IPTA) to identify the participants that match the criteria. As a result of the initial screening, only five (5) participants were found to match the criteria set by researchers. The participants involved in this study consisted of two men and three (3) women who have different backgrounds as the researcher has shown in Table 1. The interview session process was conducted at the participants' place as they are tied to lecture time, and it makes it easier for researchers to see for themselves the atmosphere of their learning environment.

Before the interview process was conducted, the researchers prepared a set of interview protocols that were discussed together and agreed upon by the supervisor. The interview protocol contains questions based on the objectives of this study and it serves as a guideline to the researchers in interviewing the participants. The interviews continued by focusing on the participants' experiences of body shaming. The interview session was audio recorded by using a voice recorder application via smartphone, at the same time the researcher also made brief notes in the short notes during the interview.

The process of manual data analysis was done starting with rewriting the interview results in verbatim form. The completed verbatim was re-read over and over again to make it easier for researchers to get an overview of the body shaming victim's experience. The next step involves the coding process. This coding is done in stages. The first stage involves open coding. Researchers have coded all meaningful words and sentences throughout the interview period. This coding can use new words from the researcher and can also use words used by the participants. Upon completing of the first screening through open coding, the next researcher performed category coding. Category coding involves the analysis of similar open codes categorized under the same category name. To get a theme, each of the same categories is grouped into one theme. As a result, researchers have come out with four themes from this thematic analysis phase.

Findings

The results of the research and interview sessions that have been conducted, researchers can see an interesting phenomenon in this study. This study was conducted on 5 individuals who have become the victims of body shaming symptoms. Clearly this study is to examine how their experience in dealing with the symptoms of body shaming. Table 1 shows the demographics of the victim’s background.

Table 1
Victims’ Background

Data Name	1st victim	2nd victim	3rd victim	4th victim	5th victim
Sex	Male	Male	Female	Female	Female
Age	28 years old	29 years old	24 years old	26 years old	25 years old

Furthermore, the findings of the study show that four main themes have emerged to answer the research question regarding the experience of body shaming victims. These four themes include (i) the meaning or perception as a victim, (ii) the support system of the victims, (iii) coping strategies for the victims, and (iv) the effects of becoming a victim. Chart 1.1 shows a summary of themes and sub -themes for all research questions.

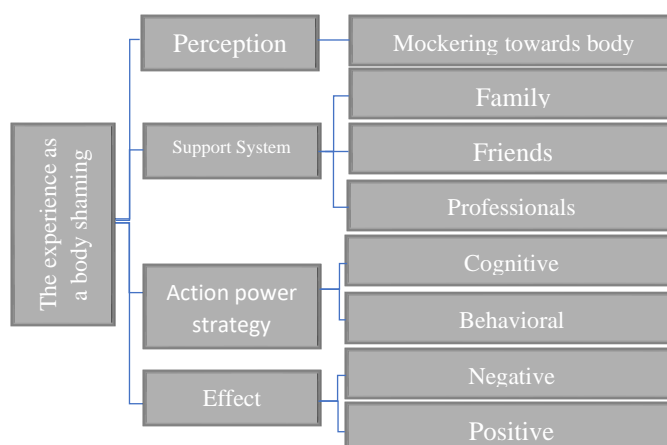


Chart 1.1 Summary of themes and sub -themes

1st Theme: Perception of Being a Victim of Body Shaming

The victims of body shaming see body shaming as an insult to one's weakness. It is also a form of verbal bullying where a person's speech and behavior can hurt the hearts of the victims. The participants also stated that individuals who do body shaming can convey it in a more positive way to avoid inferiority feeling towards the body shaming victims.

Those who experience body shaming symptoms actually know that they themselves are being criticized and mocked. Maybe in the beginning they still feel comfortable and don't care about what is being said and just think it's just a joke. But when it continues to happen

over and over again it will disrupt and change the victim's perception that it is an insult. Overweight and obese people commonly experience stigma, which enhances psychosocial stress and negatively impacts on their physical and mental wellbeing. This kind of stigma can give a huge impact on shame, self-criticism and unfavourable social comparisons, creating feelings of inferiority and inadequacy in relation to others (Duarte & Pinto-Gouveia, 2017). According to the Oxford dictionary, Body shaming is the behavior or act of humiliating a person by criticizing and mocking about the body shape or size such as fat, overweight, black and so on (Nol & Frederickson, 1998). Symptoms of body shaming can occur in several forms, namely feelings of dissatisfaction with one's own body shape, comparing one's appearance with others or criticizing and mocking the appearance of others either consciously or unconsciously (Damai et al., 2022).

"What I understand, that is body shaming, is one, which I think is an insult among the victims of such attacks. As for me, it is an insult to one's own weakness".

[PK 1/I-1/25-28]

"Body shaming from my point of view is one of bullying. But people call it as verbally bullying. I mean a behavior when someone talks to someone that makes his heart ache. I don't think we should say things like that, that's why I said it's also a bullying but in verbally".

[PK 2/I-1/38-43]

"Regarding a person being motivated, he will definitely feel inferior because of body shaming, so we can use other methods on that person to become better in the future".

[PK 2/I-1/78-80]

"The insult that I think is an insult to the weakness or lack of a person who is not the same like others".

[PK 1/I-1/33-34]

2nd Theme: Support System

The main support system to help victims of body shaming is from family members. Family members need to be by the victim's side and provide moral support even just by listening. Friends, democratic families and family members and parents who match the needs of children will increase adaptability and comfort for those children. Children who see themselves accepted by parents will show higher ego aspirations and perseverance. The family institution is a social unit that affects the development of an individual's personality as a member of society. Next, family members should work as "transmitters" or "educators" who disseminate knowledge, educate moral values, principles, behaviors and ways of thinking that affect the lives of individuals (Darling, 2022).

At the same time, friends are also an important support to the body shaming victims. The presence of these friends can help them to have a healthy socialize even if there are a

handful groups of friends who cannot accept them. In fact, the role of friends is very broad and unlimited. Kalkowski (1998) says that peers can help each other in many aspects through various forms, such as to improve academic performance, solve personal problems such as emotional problems, disciplinary problems, physical health problems and so on.

"But over time, it has become a normal thing in our lives because my life is well - established, family is also giving support and there are times when I wear a head covering."

[PK 1/I-1/69-70]

"I always be close to my family members. At least by listening to what the children want to share. So, I think that's an important thing for us to help them to overcome it".

[PK 1/I-1/82-84]

"I didn't want to be friends with anyone since in the beginning I had body shaming. But in the end, I went back to normal life because I need friends too and I can't be alone on my own".

[PK 1/I-1/174-176]

3rd Theme: Action Power Strategy

Apart from the support system, the participants also shared coping strategies used when being a body shaming victim. They choose to act in a cognitive and behavioral way. The participants took steps to ignore what people around them said. They also behave positively by continuing life as usual. Some even decide to see a professional in handling this situation. There were also participants who felt the motivation from themselves which helped them a lot to deal with body shaming situations.

"I really emphasize here that I will not care. Only if it happens to the people that I love or like, I will probably be responsible for defending them if anything happened."

[PK 2/I-1/245-247]

"Maybe if you don't want to wear it, it's okay, I mean to cover your head. You must be yourself, don't be ashamed because that's who we are".

[PK 1/I-1/191-192]

"It's not wrong to use it or not to use it at all, it's just that it is for one of the tasks, what do we have to do if we want to be more confident and I think it's ok to face it".

[PK 1/I-1/201-2013]

"For the future, be more open minded and confident. As to that, I'm sure there are those who support me. So, for me to tell others that it is not wrong to be sad or even to be hurt, but it is necessary to take time and build up confidence to accept

body shaming over and over again from your friends”.

[PK 1/I-1/230-233]

"Because I'm not that kind of person to tell other people when I have a problem. Since I was in a young age, it was difficult for me to tell my problems to people, especially my family. For me if that's my own problem, why do we need to tell it to others. This is if it really private and become a secret in my life, but for the other simple problem, it is ok if I want to share”.

[PK 2/I-1/150-153]

“Actually, what I went through had a positive vibe. Having a counselling session with the counselor became normal for me and indirectly became an added experience for me, especially in terms of gaining moral support and self - confidence”.

[PK 1/I-1/221-224]

4th Theme: The Impact of Body Shaming

The effects of body shaming victims can be classified into positive effects and negative effects. On the positive side, victims of body shaming feel they need to become better individuals after receiving criticism from peers. On the other hand, for negative effects, these criticisms make them feel inferior and humiliated since shame is a strong and culturally-driven emotional state that could lead to a negative attributional style and thus may predict the onset of hopelessness depression, a sub-type of depression (Jung et al., 2022; Evans, 2010).

"The victims who are experiencing body shaming will make them as an individual who is hurt, sad, emotionally disturbed and so on."

[PK 2/I-1/55-56]

"There are also people who say that after the body shaming occur, it is depending on how he accepts it and the way someone reprimands him."

[PK 2/I-1/ 74-75]

"Making it a positive vibe that others may not possess."

[PK 1/I-1/92]

"It will lead to depression, lack of confidence and do not want to be socialized and sometimes can lead to suicide."

[PK 1/I-1/105-107]

Discussion

Overall, the findings of the study show that victims of body shaming see body shaming as an

insult to an individual's physicality. They are aware that they are experiencing body shaming so it has a profound effect on their lives. Though the exact nature of the dissatisfaction varied, there was a commonality in the sources of dissatisfaction and internalisation of the need for an ideal body (Curtis & Loomans, 2014) The findings of this study are consistent with a study conducted by Hurlock (1997) explained that victims of body shaming are aware of what is happening. That awareness will cause them begin to be concerned with self-growth and improve on what needs to be accepted in the peer groups. This is because they assume that attractive attraction is very important for an individual to be influenced in social, community, and other peers.

Furthermore, in facing these problems, victims also need a support system to help and guide them to adapt. This result is consistent with the findings of Mahfar et al (2018) who stated that a person who experiencing stress needs support to adapt their body and thought (emotional) system into something, as to that, higher the stress level experienced by the individual, the higher his or her desire to get a support system. Social support is a social interaction in helping students according to a variety of behaviors or ways such as in the form of materialism, advice and love (Lam, 2019). Findings of the study show that among the support systems for victims of body shaming are family members, friends and professionals. Based on the interview sessions that were conducted with the five (5) victims, they are more likely to make family members and friends than counselors as supporters in dealing with the issue. This indicates that individuals or groups who have more intimate relationship with the victim have a higher percentage of helping the body shaming victims. As Cutrona and Russell (1987) point out, social support is when there are individuals who can be trusted to share and recount problems. Individuals are more likely to seek help from family members and friends if they are having problems compare to counselors. Low social support will increase the stress of individuals as well as encourage them to seek counseling services. In order to have insightful communications, one must know to convey their thoughts and emotions to the other person or themselves in the right manner (Saxena et al., 2020). When students experience stress, then they will ask other individuals to assist them in solving the problems that they faced. Students are more motivated to express the problems they face to individuals who are more experienced in solving the problems such as counselors (Overgaard-Thomsen, 2005). By sharing their feelings can also help in recovering new aspects from other people that may help them in seeing their future more clearly. There are some ways that can help them to be more expressive such as talking to other people for example the counsellors about how they feel as this helps in letting out of their emotions instead of repressing them (Saxena et al., 2020).

The experience of body shaming always leaves an impression especially on the memory of a person who will be impacted in the social life of the victim. The consequences of the body shaming issue will give negative influences to the victim, such as having a tendency to have difficulty living in society due to shameful feelings of their own self -appearance (Jung et al., 2022). Based on the results of the study, it was found that the effect of body shaming on the five (5) victims can be seen from two angles, namely the positive effect and the negative effect. Some of them consider it as a suggestion or a stepping stone for them to change and improve themselves. They evaluate the matter as a positive and a shortcoming that they need to improve. This is an internal factor that is the advantage of a person who has emotional intelligence. According to Mayer et al (1990), emotional intelligence is the ability to monitor one's own and others' feelings and emotions to distinguish and use information to guide one's own thoughts and actions. Individuals with high emotional intelligence have a tendency to establish good relationships, are easy to get along with and are smart to adapt. This is because

of his ability to increase the positive vibe in himself so that any criticism or mockery does not affect him which can be seen clearly and portrayed by him from the positive angle (Walker et al., 2022).

However, many previous studies show that the issue of body shaming is an issue that has more of a negative impact on the victims (Duarte et al., 2017; Fitriyah & Rokhmawan 2019). Thus, the findings that victims who experience body shaming will involve the individual to be hurt, sad, embarrassed, lack of self-confidence, disturbed emotions and so on. This is in line with the opinion of Damanik (2018) that individuals who experience body shaming will feel anxious and embarrassed, one of which is silence and often refrain from participating in social activities. The negative effect is that too much stress will lead to depression, lack of confidence and do not want to socialize and even worse they will take the path of suicide as a solution. There are also negative experiences specifically related to the physical appearance dimension which may play an important role in how one comes to evaluate the self-based on this dimension and that this association is relevant for binge eating symptoms in both genders (Duarte & Pinto-Gouveia, 2017) Various research findings indicate a relationship between body image, attempts to change normal eating patterns, to depression and the decision to commit suicide. A great desire to get a good body shape (in general/ social criteria) and low body image, lead to disruption of normal eating habits to problematics of eating disorders and control of poorer body nutrients intake such as bulimia (Chairani, 2018; Paxton & Franko, 2010; Thompson et al, 1995; Rosen,1990; Fabian & Thompson, 1989). This clearly causes them to feel that they are no longer healthy either physically, mentally and psychologically, and even an estimated 90% commit suicide for reasons that are not specifically known (Thambu, 2010; Gani & Jalal, 2021).

Therefore, guidance and counseling specifically related to the situation of body shaming victims should be taken seriously in helping the victims to achieve optimal development. It can be emphasized from the aspect of healthy interaction so that individuals who are victims of body shaming will become more confident. Counselors need to identify the victim's real issues so that the victims can be helped more effectively. The development of psychoeducational interventions and modules are very helpful in ensuring that these groups become more positive individuals. Some of them consider it as a suggestion or a stepping stone for them to change and improve themselves. They judge it as a positive and a shortcoming that they need to fix.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the results of the study are expected to be beneficial in understanding the experience of body shaming victims. It is hoped that the findings of this study will provide improvements in the field of knowledge and practice of counseling in Malaysia particularly and in world generally, and in turn become a trigger for more similar scientific studies conducted in the future.

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