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Body Shaming among University Students: Awareness and Implications on the Body Image

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Abstract

Body shaming is a form of bullying that exposes victims to many emotional, physical, and social risks and consequences. This study aims to determine whether university students recognise the implications of body shaming on individuals and discover the students' perspectives regarding their body image. Fifty students from five different faculties (Civil Engineering, Electrical Engineering, Mechanical Engineering, Chemical Engineering, and Hotel and Tourism) in a public university participated as the respondents in this study. A questionnaire was created in a Google form and distributed to the students via the WhatsApp application. The questionnaire focused on respondents' awareness of the implications of body shaming and their perspectives regarding their body image. The data were analysed using descriptive analysis and described in frequency and percentage. Based on the results, most respondents recognised the implications of body shaming. However, more than half of the respondents appeared to have an unfavourable opinion about their bodies. This study has demonstrated that body shaming can cause severe impacts on adolescents and society in terms of psychological concerns, body image dissatisfaction, academic implications and eating disorders. Hence, proper actions must be taken to cultivate positive attitudes and well-being in our community.

Keywords: Adolescents, Body Image, Body Shaming, Implications, Well-Being

Introduction

Background of the Study

The act of insulting a person's physical appearance, including body shape, size or skin colour, is referred to as body shaming (Gam et al., 2020; Gani & Jalal, 2020; Major et al., 2017). It is a form of discrimination or criticism perpetrated by community members, including those close to the victims, such as family members, friends, schoolmates, teachers, and colleagues. Some people might regard the action as a sense of humour (Iftitania, 2021) or advice to ensure the victims (usually overweight) could change their habits or unhealthy lifestyles. According to Phelan et al (2015), as cited in Major et al (2017), body shaming is common among healthcare providers such as doctors, clinicians, medical students, and psychotherapists. Their primary objective is to counsel overweight or underweight patients, but if it is done imprudently, the action could easily lead to body shaming.

The most prevalent type of body shaming is related to overweight or obese individuals (Gani & Jalal, 2020; Iftitania, 2021; Mustafa et al., 2022), which constantly occurs in the media as a part of entertainment. For instance, overweight people are frequently depicted on social media as a running gag, resulting in “fat jokes” that have been normalised in society (Aziz, 2017). Gani and Jalal (2020) identified that 57.1% of adolescents agreed that the typical type of body shaming they experienced was related to body weight. According to Santaso (2018), 966 incidents of physical embarrassment or body shaming were reported in 2018. Another study of 2,000 adults found that 56% had received unfavourable remarks about their image (Hughes, 2019), while in a cross-sectional study conducted in India, 44.9 per cent of students confirmed having been body shamed at least once in the previous year (Gam et al., 2020).

Body shaming has also been linked to severe psychological and physiological implications in young people, which include mental distress, social exclusion, drug and alcohol abuse, suicidality, negative body image, low self-esteem, eating disorder, sedentary lifestyle, and excess weight (Gam et al., 2020; Greenleaf et al., 2014; Pont et al., 2017) with mental stress being the most alarming issue discussed in the literature. According to a recent meta-analysis, diagnostically identified obese youngsters had a 40% significantly increased risk of being depressed (Mannan et al., 2016). One primary reason is that overweight children and adolescents are socially stereotyped, exposing them to weight-related bias and harassment (such as taunting and social exclusion) (Major et al., 2017). These types of personal and interpersonal dismissal frequently encourage feelings of inferiority and consequently lead to emotional stress and social trauma. In other severe conditions, body shaming victims might have suicidal ideation due to prolonged depression (Greenleaf et al., 2014; Iftitania, 2021).

Problem Statement

Body shaming has recently appeared as a substantial issue in our community due to the idealisation of some specific beauty characteristics. According to Soleman and Elindawati (2019), beauty standards of varying intensity have become common for men and women. In general, a woman is deemed beautiful if she is slim, tall, fair and has long, straight hair, while a man is viewed as attractive if he has an athletic body, tall, and fair skin (Evelianti et al., 2020; Kenny & Nichols, 2017). This misleading ideology of beauty is propagated all over the world via artwork, mass media, technology, and literary works (Karacan, 2007 as cited in Kumara & Jayawardhana, 2018). As a result, people who have met the ‘beauty standard’ in society will be highly accepted and acknowledged, whereas those who are regarded as less attractive will be neglected or mistreated by society (Mustafa et al., 2022).

In order to conform to the ideal beauty standard whereby individuals worldwide are constantly exposed to world standards of advertisements, a wide variety of items are readily available on the market for concealing, mending, or eliminating beauty “flaws” (Kenny & Nichols, 2017). Besides that, our youth today (also identified as Generation Z) are easily influenced by the ‘ideal body’ promoted on social media (Aziz, 2017; Gam et al., 2020), which has made them involved in body shaming. Studies have found that they frequently make disparaging remarks about their peers’ or even their physical appearance when it appears less than ideal, as depicted in the media. According to Major et al. (2017), some people might accidentally commit body shaming without harmful intention because it has been normalised in the culture. This immoral conduct may begin as early as primary school and persist

throughout adulthood. Hence, this study aimed to spread awareness about body shaming, especially among young adults.

The consequences of body shaming, especially on mental health, have been widely discussed in the literature. According to psychological studies, body shaming victims experience shame about specific body parts when they receive judgments and self-evaluations from others that are not in line with their ideal expectations (Damanik, 2018, as cited in Gani & Jalal, 2020). Victims who have experienced body shaming will also have psychological symptoms such as depression, anxiety, eating disorders, subclinical sociopathy, and low self-esteem (Gam et al., 2020; Gani & Jalal, 2020; Greenleaf et al., 2014; Pont et al., 2017). Although Gani and Jamal (2020) stated that some people have internal characteristics that enable them to act positively to comments or judgments about their appearance, it is only a small percentage. According to Mental Health Foundation (2019), 22% of adults and 40% of youth reported being concerned about their body image due to the influence of 'ideal' social media photographs. This survey shows that many people face more difficulty maintaining a positive body image. Therefore, this study also aimed to investigate university students' perspectives regarding their body image.

Research Objectives

The study aims to delve into the risks and implications of body shaming through the lens of university students. The objectives are as follows:

1. To determine if the students are aware of the implications of body shaming on victims.
2. To identify the perspectives of the students regarding their body image.

Significance of the Study

This study provides insights into the general information on body shaming and its adverse effects that some people may be unaware of. This research is significant in raising awareness about body shaming, particularly among students, parents, and educators. Additionally, it helps assist young people experiencing psychological issues due to body shaming. Educators could also be more sensitive to students experiencing trauma or mental health issues associated with their body image and play roles in spreading more knowledge at the institutions.

Moreover, parents with a better understanding of body shaming could assist their children in enhancing their confidence and body image. Their children's mental well-being can be monitored at home to prevent depression and other psychological concerns. This study is also essential to encourage people to develop a positive body image, as everyone should accept their physical appearance. Society can learn to be more careful when giving comments, offline and online, so they will not be involved in body shaming. In other words, this research may help people respect one another and appreciate their physical differences.

Limitations of the Study

The study demographic variables and the population size are the limitations of this study. Although body shaming can affect individuals of all ages, this study focused on youth populations, and most respondents were university students aged 21-25 (98%). Thus, the findings could only reflect the beliefs and perceptions of this specific age group. Besides that, only a subset of university students (particularly at the degree level) were the respondents of this study. Therefore, the results cannot be generalised to all university students or the entire

Malaysian youth population. Nonetheless, the findings may provide insight into how this specific group of people recognises and reacts to body shaming.

Literature Review

Fantatised' Physical Appearance and Negative Body Image

Body shaming is a form of bullying that mainly targets someone's physical parts (Saxena et al., 2020). Physical appearance includes body weight, body shape, skin colour, facial features, height, clothing choices and make-up. According to Kumara and Jayawardhana (2018), being fair, thin, wrinkleless, and flawless are all aspects of the so-called "fantasy body image". The idea of western beauty standards has been idealised through culture, arts, movies, stories, fables, and dolls such as Barbie (Kumara & Jayawardhana, 2018). In fairy tales or movies, evil characters are usually ugly or dark-skinned, whereas slim, flawless and light-skinned characters are portrayed as kind. Social media has also become a platform to promote the ideal or fantasised body image (Aziz, 2017; Gam et al., 2020). This introduction of the ideal body image has manipulated adolescents' minds, and they begin to doubt themselves by comparing their bodies to digitally altered ones. This habit of doubting oneself can contribute to low self-esteem and negative body image (Mustafa et al., 2022).

According to Tylka (2018), body image disruption, also known as negative body image, can manifest in various ways, including appearance displeasure, self-objectification, body shame, and internalisation of advertising beauty standards. A cross-sectional investigation identified that the prevalence of negative body image among youngsters could reach 71%, especially among female and overweight respondents. In other studies, the prevalence of body dissatisfaction in developed countries ranges from 16% to 55% in boys and 35% to 81% in girls. (Finato et al., 2013; Lawler & Nixon, 2011, as cited in Moehlecke et al., 2020). Aziz (2017) stated that past studies had discovered the relationship between media exposure and negative body image. The new media, mainly social media such as Instagram, provides instant access to a wide range of idealised physical appearances, which leads to negative body image among users. Since the number of body image dissatisfaction is relatively high, raising awareness about positive body image is essential.

The Stigma of Weight

The most predominant type of body shaming is related to body weight, and some studies use the term 'weight stigma'. Weight stigma is defined as negative thoughts and behaviours - stereotyping, favouritism, prejudice, and social isolation that depreciate people based on their body image and are predominantly aimed at obese people (Brown et al., 2022). Crandall (1994); Smith (2012), as cited in Webb et al (2016), linked body shaming with three aspects of anti-fat attitudes: 1) "dislike attitudes" displaying intense hatred for overweight people, 2) self-control beliefs concentrating on fat people being solely responsible for their "extra" weight, and 3) fear of fat attitudes expressing anxiousness of weight gain as a marker of social exclusion. The first two aspects are related to the body shaming perpetrators, while the third aspect is related to the victims. According to Fathi (2011), the victims of body shaming normally experience fear, guilt, and embarrassment when human surroundings criticise them, which may lead them to anti-fat attitudes or negative body image.

Weight stigma often results in low self-esteem, low body dissatisfaction, and depressive symptoms, consistent with an increasing body of research highlighting the negative role of

appearance-based harassment among youngsters (Bruewis & Bruening, 2018; Gani & Jalal, 2020). Individuals may feel anxious and depressed when they feel their bodies cannot meet social standards (Soleman & Elindawati, 2019; Sugiati, 2019). Saxena et al (2020) claimed that both men and women sometimes have body dissatisfaction, which can lead to inferiority and psychological distress. Besides mental health, students' physical well-being is also vulnerable. Some think they can become thin and get their desired body features if they eat less. Pont et al (2017) highlighted the risk of unhealthy eating habits and eating disorders due to body shaming. According to Lavender and Anderson (2010), regulating one's emotions becomes critical and, if mismanaged, will contribute to maladaptive and unhealthy eating habits.

The Influence of Body Shaming on University Students' Behaviour Patterns

Students are vulnerable to body shame; they usually feel bad and nervous about their personality and physical appearance (Sugiati, 2019). The main reason is that university students come from different backgrounds and have different physical appearances. Students with different physical appearances from the majority, such as overweight or obese, will be body shamed and neglected by others. As a result, the students are often absent to avoid being criticised or body shamed by their peers (Gam et al., 2020). Body shaming was also associated with lower self-esteem, body image, and body self-worth in female undergraduates (Shannon & Mills, 2015, as cited in Webb et al., 2015). In other words, body shaming victims have low self-esteem to confront the public and feel insecure about going to college or university. This situation would most likely lead to poor academic results among university students.

In addition, body shaming could also occur through communication via the Internet and social media. As a result, people begin to notice a change in their social interaction patterns. The Internet is a two-edged sword, having a positive impact on one side and a harmful impact on the other, especially for students who spend most of their time with their devices. One of the negative impacts is cyberbullying. According to Damanik (2018), due to the judgment of himself and others toward the ideal body shape that does not correspond to his body, cyberbullying causes a person to believe that his body is shameful. Students who experience body shaming also exhibit an increase in silence and isolation. Due to embarrassment and fear, they prefer to remain silent about the treatment they have endured without taking any legal action. It is projected that if no precautionary steps are taken, the affected individuals will likely seek to end their own lives (Greenleaf et al., 2014; Iftitania, 2021).

Methodology

The study was carried out at a public university in Malaysia. Fifty students from the Faculty of Civil Engineering, Faculty of Mechanical Engineering, Faculty of Chemical Engineering, Faculty of Electrical Engineering and Faculty of Hotel Management and Tourism participated in this study. The data collection method used in this study was a questionnaire created in a Google Form. Since this study was conducted during the Covid-19 pandemic in 2021, the Google form was the best and most practical tool to gather the data.

The questionnaire was divided into three sections. Section A required respondents' demographic information, while Section B and Section C included statements related to the research objectives. The questionnaire focused on the respondents' understanding and awareness of the risks and consequences of body shaming (Section B - 13 questions) and the

students' perceptions of body image (Section C - 6 questions). All questions in Section B and Section C used the Likert Scale approach ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree (except for the first question in Section B).

The questionnaire was distributed using the WhatsApp application to selected students in the university. Since the questionnaire was online and easily accessible via the link provided, the respondents could answer the questionnaire conveniently. The Google form application generates statistics from the data that were collected. The data obtained were converted from frequency count into percentages in chart and table forms. The analysed data were discussed by relating it to the research objectives and past studies.

Findings

Based on the reliability test on the questionnaire, Cronbach's Alpha scores show high internal consistency in all sections of the questionnaire.

Table 1

The reliability test results of the questionnaire

Sections	Cronbach's Alpha	No. of Items
A	.893	3
B	.891	14
C	.887	5

Demographic Details

The required data were obtained from the questionnaire using the Google form distributed to the respondents. Table 2 displays the demographic details of respondents.

Table 2

Demographic details of respondents.

Age	Frequency	Percentage
21-25	49	98%
26 and above	1	2%
Gender	Frequency	Percentage
Male	20	40%
Female	30	60%
Faculty	Frequency	Percentage
Civil Engineering	11	22%
Electrical Engineering	11	22%
Mechanical Engineering	9	18%
Chemical Engineering	8	16%
Hotel Management and Tourism	11	22%

The data shows that 60% of respondents are female students, and the remaining 40% are male students. The respondents are between 21 and 26 years old.

Data Analysis of Research Objectives

RO1: Determining university students' understanding of body shaming and its implications on the victims.

This section verifies our first research objective. The respondents were asked 15 questions based on our first objective (determining the university students' understanding of body shaming and its implications on the victims). The first question was related to the frequency of respondents being body shamed.

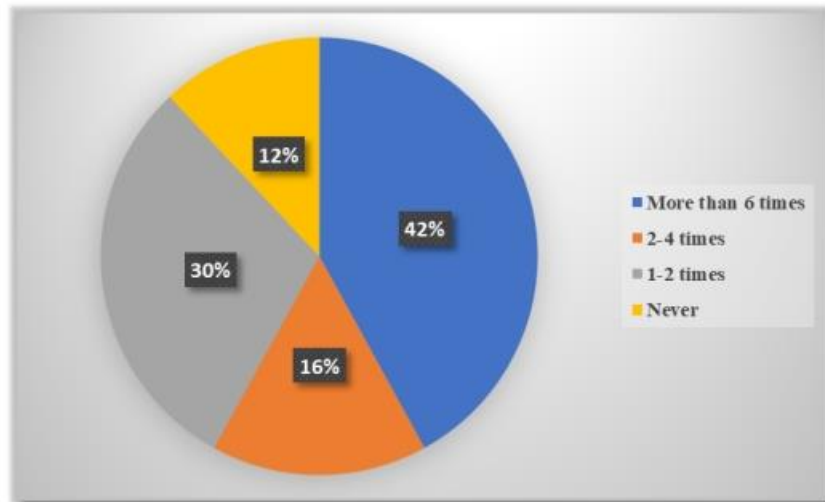


Figure 1: The frequency of respondents being body shamed

Figure 1 depicts the percentage of students who have previously been body shamed. Out of 50 responses, 42% of the respondents have been body-shamed more than six times, and 16% have been body-shamed three to five times. This finding shows that most students have experienced body shaming multiple times.

Table 3 below presents the data related to students' awareness of body shaming and its implications on the victims.

Table 3

University students' awareness of body shaming.

Questionnaire Items	1 Strongly Disagree		2 Disagree		3 Neutral		4 Agree		5 Strongly Agree	
	Freq uen cy	Per cen tag e	Fre que ncy	Perc enta ge	Freq uen cy	Per cen tag e	Fre que ncy	Perc enta ge	Freq uen cy	Perc enta ge
I think most people are body-shamed due to their skin colour.	0	0%	0	0%	13	26%	20	40%	17	34%
2. I think most people are body shamed because of their body weight/ shape/ size.	0	0%	0	0%	3	6%	13	26%	34	68%
3. I think most people experience body shame because of their appearance (fashion, hairstyle, make-up).	0	0%	3	6%	13	26%	18	36%	16	34%
4. I think body shaming has multiple risks and implications.	0	0%	0	0%	1	2%	16	32%	33	66%
5. I think body shaming could affect the victims' self-esteem.	0	0%	0	0%	2	4%	8	16%	40	80%
6. I think body shaming could affect victims in terms of their physical well-being.	0	0%	0	0%	4	8%	11	22%	35	70%
7. I think people might change their eating habits due to body shaming.	0	0%	0	0%	13	20%	26	52%	11	22%
8. I think people might consume unnecessary beauty products due to body shaming.	0	0%	0	0%	13	20%	16	32%	24	48%
9. I think body shaming could affect victims' psychological health.	0	0%	1	2%	2	4%	16	32%	31	62%
10. I think body shaming could affect victims' academic performance.	0	0%	2	4%	4	8%	21	42%	23	46%

11. I think it is normal for body shaming victims to harm themselves.	3	6%	3	6%	11	22%	17	34%	16	32%
12. I think body shaming victims could end up committing suicide.	4	8%	4	8%	16	32%	15	30%	11	22%
13. I think body shaming is a crime.	0	0%	0	0%	4	8%	19%	38%	27	54%
14. I think body shaming should not happen in the community.	0	0%	0	0%	1	2%	7%	14%	42	84%

The results can be categorised into three parts: 1) Common types of body shaming; 2) The implications of body shaming; 3) general opinions. Based on the results, 94% of the respondents agreed that most victims experienced body shaming because of their body weight, height, shape and size, while 74% agreed that most people are body shamed due to skin colour.

In terms of body shaming implications, we identified three main issues which are low self-esteem, mental health issues and academic performance. The most alarming concern is that body shaming could affect the victim's self-esteem, and 96% of the respondents agreed with it (item no.5). Next, 94% of respondents agreed that body shaming could affect victims' mental health, while 88% of them agreed that body shaming could affect victims' academic performance.

The findings also show that 98% of respondents agreed that body shaming could bring harm or risks to the victims' future and life, while 92% of the university students agreed that body shaming is a crime. Lastly, 98% of the respondents agreed that body shaming should not happen in the community.

RO2: Identifying university students' body image attitudes.

The second objective was to identify students' body image attitudes, and the respondents were asked five questions. The data were tabulated in table 4.

Table 4

University students' attitudes related to body image.

Question naire Items	1 Strongly Disagree		2 Disagree		3 Neutral		4 Agree		5 Strongly Agree	
	Frequ ency	Percen tage %	Frequ ency	Percen tage %	Frequ ency	Percen tage	Frequ ency	Percen tage	Frequ ency	Percen tage
1. I spend too much time worrying about people's views of my body.	4	8%	5	10%	16	32%	19	38%	6	12%
2. I compare my appearance to other people on social media.	1	2%	7	14%	9	18%	23	46%	10	20%
3. I feel pressured to have an ideal body.	4	8%	3	6%	15	30%	15	30%	13	26%
4. I usually avoid people because of negative feelings about my appearance.	0	0%	6	12%	17	34%	19	38%	8	16%
5. I'm not really satisfied with my physical appearance.	4	8%	15	30%	15	30%	10	20%	6	12%

The results show that most respondents (66%) compared their appearance to others on social media, while 16% were pessimistic about the statement. Item no. 4 shows the statement related to respondents' behaviours of avoiding people due to their negative feelings about their appearance. 54% of the respondents avoided people because of how they feel about their appearance, 34% were neutral about it, and 12% disagreed with the statement. For item no.3 - *"I feel pressure to have an ideal body"*, 56% of the respondents agreed that they feel the pressure to have an ideal body, while 14% disagreed with the statement. Lastly, it is discovered that 34% of the students disagreed with the statement *"I'm not really satisfied with my physical appearance"*, while 32% agreed.

Discussion

This study has shown that university students are cognizant of body shaming and its implications on the victims. This is because most respondents (86%) have experienced body shaming at least once in their lifetime. The finding proves that young adults are vulnerable to this abusive behaviour (Major et al., 2017), and it has become more prevalent due to social media (Soleman & Elindawati, 2019; Sugiati, 2019). From the data obtained in Section B, most respondents agreed that body shaming could bring harm to individuals. Apparently, body weight or size is the most prevalent issue, and 94% of the respondents agreed. Similar findings can be found in Brewis and Bruening (2018); Brown et al (2022), who have reported that students who were classified as overweight or obese experienced more body shaming. From this standpoint, it seems that people who are body-shaming others rely on the victim's appearance and have their beauty standards (Soleman & Elindawati, 2019; Sugiati, 2019).

It is also found that 88% of respondents agreed that body shaming could affect individuals' academic performance. Body-shamed students might feel embarrassed and tend to neglect their studies. This data supports Gam et al (2020), who claimed that body shaming is the main reason for absenteeism among students. This study also reveals that body shaming can affect an individual's level of self-esteem and mental health, which corresponds to most studies on body shaming (Brewis & Bruening, 2018; Gani & Jamal, 2020; Greenleaf et al., 2014; Pont et al., 2017; Saxena et al., 2020). According to Saxena et al. (2020), it was found that men and women both tend to feel unpleasant emotions and inadequate expressions when they have a poor body image or impression of their bodies. Some people, especially young adults, might not have inner strengths or the ability to control their minds and feelings in dealing with body shaming.

The analysis of the third section of the questionnaire (Section C) shows that about 50-66% of the students agreed with items 1-4 related to negative body image. This finding shows that more than half of the respondents struggled with their body image. It may have happened due to social stigma or ideal beauty standards promoted on social media (Soleman & Elindawati, 2019; Sugiati, 2019). 66% of the respondents compared their appearance with other social media users, while more than 50% agreed that they feel pressure to have an ideal body, often avoid people due to their appearance and mostly spend time worrying about others' perceptions of their bodies. This data is consistent with other literature that relates body shaming to negative body image and social isolation (Aziz, 2017; Brown et al., 2022; Gam et al., 2020; Kenny & Nichols, 2017).

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study confirmed that youth today recognise body shaming and its implications on the victims. Based on the results, most university students agreed that body shaming could bring several risks and implications on the victims' mental, physical, and social well-being. The victims may experience low self-esteem, negative body image and avoid meeting people. They might also tend to harm themselves and, in a worse scenario, commit suicide. We can conclude that the ideal beauty standard promoted on social media has caused adolescents' negative body image. Therefore, more efforts are needed to promote positive body image among university students

Positive attitudes and values must begin at home, in which parents should cultivate an inner supporter through actions such as positive attitudes, thoughts, and language. Parents may implicitly influence youths' self-worth (Michael et al., 2014) by acknowledging children's strengths and abilities in terms of their character rather than their appearance. The youngsters are undoubtedly bombarded with manipulated images related to the definition of beauty, but parents should set the real beauty definition at home. Besides that, prioritising healthy eating, physical activities, and positive behaviours over outward appearances could serve as an excellent reminder to everyone in the family that, while appearances fade, staying healthy has long-term benefits.

A lack of knowledge related to body shaming can lead a person to have lack of respect for others and feelings of insecurity (Mustafa et al., 2022). Therefore, educational and professional organisations, medical practitioners, media, and authorities should nurture knowledge regarding body image and promote a new national discourse about obesity consistent with current research findings (Brown et al., 2022). Teachers and educators at all levels must take responsibility for reminding students to value one another and avoid discrimination. Social media could also be used to raise awareness about the harmful effects of body shaming on victims and society. Finally, the whole community must start to change the way of giving comments, especially regarding physical appearance. Being more sensitive and respectful is the best attitude to be normalised to reduce body shaming and enhance positive body image, especially among youths.

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