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BODY SHAMING: BELIEFS AND AWARENESS AMONG MALAYSIAN TERTIARY STUDENTS AND THE ROLE OF INSTITUTIONAL INTERVENTION

Huzaifah A Hamid¹, Norlizawati Ghazali², Naginder Kaur³, Siti Sarina Sulaiman⁴, Amizura Hanadi Mohd Radzi^{5*} & Yang Salehah Abdullah Sani⁶

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
<i>Article history:</i> Received April 2024 Accepted April 2025 Published July 2025 <i>Keywords:</i> Awareness, Belief, Body Image, Body Shaming, Institutional Intervention Corresponding Author: amizura@uitm.edu.my	The shift from childhood to adulthood is characterised by significant changes in physical, mental, sexual, psychological, and social development. These difficult years may have long-term ramifications for an individual, particularly in terms of mental health. The act of ridiculing or degrading someone's looks is known as body shaming, weight shaming, or appearance-based harassment. This frequently lowers an individual's self-esteem and body satisfaction, which ultimately leads to depression. This study aims to determine the prevalence of body shaming among undergraduates, as well as their perception on their institution's intervention regarding body shaming occurrences. A set of questionnaires was administered to 230 participants from six faculties in a local educational institution in Malaysia. Stratified random sampling was conducted to select the sample population of the undergraduate programmes. The results revealed that the level of awareness among undergraduates on body shaming incidences in their institution is low. Participants also admitted disregarding the body shaming incident when it happened to them. It was also found that participants were unaware of the intervention method offered by their institution, yet they believe that the institution will most likely intervene in making itself a safe environment. In conclusion, the body shaming prevalence observed in the present study is high in terms of undergraduates' beliefs on institution's intervention commitment, but lower in terms of its prevalence awareness

among undergraduates, thus drawing attention to the need for similar studies on the subject.

1. Introduction

The act of ridiculing or demeaning a person based on his or her physical appearance is known as body shaming, weight shaming, or appearance-based harassment (Duncan, Zimmer-Gembeck & Furman, 2018, as cited in Ismail, Daud, & Ligadu, 2021). This behavior can have profound psychological and emotional consequences for the victim, often undermining their self-esteem and well-being. It not only perpetuates harmful societal standards around beauty and physique but also has the potential to lead to mental health issues such as anxiety and depression.

Body image has not received equivalent empirical attention in Malaysia, although there is evidence that it is occurring among tertiary students. Malaysia has a higher rate of obesity than any other country in Southeast, South, or East Asia (Ismail et al., 2002), and it is more prevalent among females than males. It is critical to research the risk factors for obesity in young girls, including college students approaching adulthood, to design and implement effective preventative programmes (Gopalakrishnan et al., 2012). In Malaysia, the relationship between obesity and body shame may be particularly pertinent to study. Physical appearance is becoming more important, particularly among university students, as it reflects an individual's total attractiveness level. In 2009, a study was conducted on the perception of body image among male and female adolescents in Malaysia. It was revealed that 87 percent of them were concerned with their body shape (Khor et al., 2009). In addition, both males and females who were overweight had lower level of confidence and acceptance, and experienced higher anxiety level due to their body weight and shape. The findings suggested that adequate institutional intervention is required to prevent distorted body image, which may have detrimental consequences. Four years later, a study conducted on the gender differences in body image perception among Northern Malaysian tertiary students found that 91% of these adolescents were concerned with their body shape and perceived their body shape differently, with females (63.8%) admitted having problems about their body shape compared to males with 48.7% (Wong & Say, 2013). Similarly, Sidek and Hanapiah (2018) conducted a study on adolescents' perceptions on body image and weight loss behavior. The study revealed that more than half of the participants were somehow affected by the shape of their body and dissatisfied with their body image. They also concluded that more tailored intervention programmes are necessary among adolescents to promote a healthy body image. It is frustrating to note that despite the results clearly obtained from the previous study by Khor et al. (2009), the results had remained the same nine years later – body image is still one of the primary concerns and prevalence among tertiary students.

University setting largely provides an excellent opportunity for intervention due to its convenience in offering access for problem diagnosis and screening, as well as the integration of prevention programmes into its coursework either on or off campus. Therefore, it is important for students to be aware and fully utilized these facilities to instil positive body image. As such, the aims of this study are to determine the level of awareness among undergraduates regarding body shaming issue on campus and its effects on the victims and perpetrators. In addition, it also aims to find out undergraduates' perception on their educational institution's intervention regarding body

shaming incidences occurring on campus. There are several questions which this study proposes to address that can be raised based on the discussion so far:

1. What is the level of awareness among undergraduates regarding body shaming issue on campus?
2. How does body shaming affect the victims and perpetrators?
3. How do undergraduates perceive their educational institution's intervention regarding body shaming cases occurring on campus?

2. Literature Review

With the infiltration of the social media concept of influencers and constant reminders about how one should look, it is inevitable for adolescents who place strong values in their identity formation to be increasingly lured into the idea of the 'perfect body'. Body image, which is inextricably linked to the sociocultural framework through which people perceive bodies and to social preferences for what constitutes an attractive physical body, was recently identified as a significant risk factor for obesity. Ultimately, those who do not conform to this ideal is inevitably shamed because of their appearance. This impact may also contribute to unhealthy body shape expectations among adolescents, both in themselves and in others, which may lead to taunting of peers who do not fit into these cultural ideals despite having a healthy weight. For instance, disordered eating among adolescents is rampant in Malaysia. In the state of Kelantan, about 22.3% of female adolescents in general suffered from disordered eating (Soo et al., 2008, as cited in Ishak et al., 2016) while 27.8% female adolescents suffered from the same condition in Pahang, (Farah Wahida, Mohd. Nasir, & Hazizi, 2011, as cited in Ishak et al., 2016).

McKinley and Hyde (1996) suggested that the concept of objectified body consciousness is made up of three separate components: ongoing self-scrutiny and external judgment of one's physique, emotional distress from failing to meet societal beauty norms, and the conviction that one can change their physical looks through personal effort and control. Among these facets, body surveillance and body shame have received considerable attention from scholars due to their associations with a variety of negative outcomes, including abnormal eating attitudes and behaviours (O'Hara et al., 2016), body image concerns (Gioia et al., 2020), eating disorders (Nechita et al., 2021), depression (Weingarden et al., 2017 & Sick et al., 2020), and low self-esteem (Cella et al., 2020). Given these negative repercussions, it is critical to understand the origins of body monitoring and body shame. These behaviors are highly associated with physical, mental, and psychological trauma in the future.

Given Malaysia's rapid growth, it is acceptable to conclude that urbanisation and socioeconomic development have had a significant impact on the development of young Malaysian ladies' body image. Their extensive exposure to media and social networking sites appears to be a significant element influencing body image. Smartphone ownership has expanded substantially in recent years in Malaysia (Poushter, 2016), and a prior study revealed that over half of college students were addicted to social networking sites such as Facebook and Instagram (Jafarkarimi et al., 2016). The study established that Facebook and Instagram have a considerable influence on college students' psychological domains. Additionally, in this study, scores on body shame and perceived family pressure, both of which were altered by social networking sites use, were found to be substantially linked with body mass index (BMI). While additional research is necessary, the findings suggest that ethnic disparities in obesity prevalence today may reflect differences in the usage and exposure to social networking sites rather than other core ethnic and sociocultural behaviours. Sai et al. (2018) surveyed 371 female students from three Malaysian institutions (mean age 20.15 0.16 years). Along with demographic and personal questions, the questionnaire includes validated instruments on body image and

sociocultural effects. Bivariate analysis revealed ethnic differences in areas such as body surveillance, body shame, and family and media pressures, but ethnic and religious effects vanished in multivariable general linear model analysis. The study concluded that exposure to social media (as defined by the number of Facebook friends or Instagram followers, as well as the amount of time spent each day on social networking services) was associated with poorer body image scores on scales.

Most of the prior research has focused on the association between obesity and body shame. Previous research on female Malaysians found that obesity was associated with age, ethnic origin, religion, education, and marital status. For example, one study found that Malay and Indian Malaysians were more likely to be fat than Chinese Malaysians and that Muslims, Christians, and Hindus were more likely to be obese than Buddhists (Sidiki & Rampal, 2009). Females also demonstrated racial differences in a study of college students, with Malays (36.4 percent) and Indians (38.4 percent) having a greater prevalence rate than Chinese (30.9 percent) (Gopalakrishnan et al., 2012).

Apart from female, mounting data indicates that university men, too, struggle with negative body image issues, including unhappiness with many parts of their appearance, particularly muscularity (McCreary, 2011 & Parent, 2013). This is especially true in countries where the ideal male physique is defined by a tall, lean, and muscular body. Men, according to research, have about the same level of negative body image as women, but are less inclined to express their worries for fear of being viewed as less masculine (Lamarche et al., 2018). Smyth et al. (2020) studied the psychobiological and behavioural response-recovery profiles of university men. Males in the high-threat condition reported experiencing more post-threat bodily shame, had higher post-threat cortisol levels, and engaged in more shame-relevant behaviours than men in the low-threat condition.

Due to the high prevalence of body dissatisfaction among adolescents, several institutions have touted the establishment of health education and health promotion programmes to prevent these issues from escalating. Many school-based interventions have been introduced in Malaysia, including the Healthy Lifestyle in Children (HELIC) (Buhari, 2003), Healthy Kids Programme (Zawiah et al., 2012), Body Image Education Package (Rasyedah et al., 2003), and the Malaysian Childhood Obesity Treatment Trial (MASCOT) (Wafa et al., 2011). One of the recent programmes introduced was the 'Eat Right, Be Positive About Your Body, and Live Actively (EPaL), an integrated health education intervention among adolescents aged 13 to 14, which was launched in 2016. These programmes aimed at promoting healthy lifestyle which encompasses healthy eating, positive body image and active lifestyle. However, there is a lack of intervention programmes conducted among university students in Malaysia, which suggests that body image prevalence among university students has not been given the attention it deserves.

3. Methodology

3.1 Subject and Sampling Method

A cross-sectional study was conducted in March 2020 to identify the effects of body shaming in terms of sociocultural and psychological related to the body image perception among undergraduate students at a local tertiary institution. Stratified random sampling method was used to obtain the data from the students. Survey form was created through online via Google Form and the link was given to students who were invited to participate in this survey. A total number of 230 male and female participants have participated in this study. The

participants were from six different faculties which include the Faculty of Accountancy, Faculty of Architecture, Planning and Surveying, Faculty of Applied Sciences, Faculty of Plantation and Agrotechnology, Faculty of Computer and Mathematical Sciences and Faculty of Sports Science and Recreation.

3.2 Ethical Approval

Before conducting the study, an approval has been obtained from the Academy of Language Studies (APB) of the institution, in which all the participants had registered a course with, within that semester. The participants' consent was also obtained prior to the data collection.

3.3 Research Instruments

A set of questionnaires was selected as the research instrument and were distributed among the institution's undergraduate students. The questionnaires consisted of two sections which are participants' demographic data as well as body shaming issues and the institutional intervention. The questionnaires include two sections:

Demographic Data

Demographic data includes age, gender, programme, and self-reported body height and body weight were assessed in the questionnaires. The range for height started at below 150 cm with the highest being above 180 cm. Body weight ranges from 40 to 44 kg until above 90 kg.

Body Shaming Issues and Institutional Intervention

For body shaming issues, the questionnaire focuses on the participants' awareness on body shaming issues occurring on campus. There were 11 items in this section which include students' perceptions on the seriousness of the issue, the factors, and effects of such incidences as well as the intervention methods and support available on campus.

4. Results

4.1 Participants' Demographic Characteristics

Table 1 shows the demographic data of the participants. 230 students at a local tertiary institution participated in this study with a response rate of 99.6%. More than half of the participants were females (63%) and male participants made up of 37%. According to the responses, majority of participants (34.8%) fell in the height range of 161 to 170 cm while 17.6% had an average weight of 50 to 54 kg in majority.

Table 1
Descriptive Analysis of Demographic Characteristics of the Participants

Characteristics		Percentage
Gender		
	Male	37
	Female	63
Age (year)		
	19-20	96
	21-22	3.1
	23-24	0.4
	25 and above	0.4
Height (cm)		
	Below 150	5.7
	150-155	13.7
	156-160	26.4
	161-170	34.8
	171-175	12.3
	176-180	4.4
	Above 180	2.6
Weight (kg)		
	40-44	10.6
	45-49	14.1
	50-54	17.6
	55-59	13.2
	60-64	11.0
	65-69	8.8
	70-74	7.5
	75-79	4.0
	80-84	5.7
	85-89	3.1
	Above 90	4.4

4.2 Body Shaming Issues and Institutional Intervention

Based on Table 2, more than 50% of the participants were somewhat unconcern about the body shaming issue on campus. Specifically, 68.3% reported that the issue is manageable followed by 19.8% who did not perceive the issue as a serious matter, 6.2% believe that the issue is serious and only 5.7% were really concern with the body shaming issue occurring on campus.

Table 2
Body Shaming Concerns

Body shaming concerns	Percentage
Not serious at all	19.8
Manageable	68.3
Serious	6.2
Very serious	5.7

While for body shaming prevalence based on gender, majority of the participants (48.5%) perceived the issue as more common among females (48.5%) compared to males (5.7%), while 45.8% believed that the issue is equally common among males and females (Table 3).

Table 3
Body Shaming Prevalence Based on Gender

Body shaming prevalence based on gender	Percentage
Males	5.7
Females	48.5
Equal among males and females	45.8

Table 4 shows that there was a significant difference between those who have been body shamed and those who have not. It was revealed that 67% of the participants admitted having become the victim of body shaming while only 33% have never experienced it.

Table 4
Body Shaming Experience

Body shaming experience	Percentage
Have been body shamed	67
Have never been body shamed	33

Table 5 shows that there was a significant association between factors of body shaming and effects of body shaming. The results revealed that 60.7% of the participants admitted that the main motive to body-shame was that it was meant as a joke without any ill feelings. Moreover, more than half of the participants chose to ignore the body shaming comments and continue their routines as usual (52.8%).

Table 5
Factors and Effects of Body Shaming

Factors and effects of body shaming	Percentage
Factors	
Meant as a joke	60.7
To make others aware of their physical shortcomings	13.5
To make others change their physical appearance	5.6
Meant as a retaliation	13.5
To show dislike	6.7
Effects	
Ignored the comments	52.8
Felt upset and changed myself	17.6
Felt discouraged but did nothing	9.6
Distanced myself from the perpetrator	15.2
Confronted the perpetrator	4.8

Table 6 indicates the participants were mostly uncertain of where or whom should the body shaming incident be reported to (55.1%) followed by aware (25.6%) and unaware (19.4%).

Table 6
Institutional Intervention Awareness on Body Shaming

Institutional intervention awareness on body shaming	Percentage
Aware	25.6
Unaware	19.4
Uncertain	55.1

Based on Table 7, 54.3% of the participants believed that their institution would intervene in the body shaming issue to resolve it, 20.0% felt that there will not be any actions taken by their institution to resolve the issue, and 25.7% were uncertain whether their institution will take the issue seriously.

Table 7
Beliefs in the Institutional Intervention on Body Shaming

Beliefs in the institutional intervention on body shaming	Percentage
Will intervene	54.3
Will not intervene	20.0
Uncertain	25.7

5. Discussion

5.1 Students' Awareness on Body Shaming

The aim of this study was to examine the perceptions on body shaming concerns and institutional intervention regarding body shaming issue among undergraduate students. Generally, more than 50% of the participants felt that the issue is manageable and can be dealt with. This finding contradicts with those from previous studies where they noted that adolescents experienced anxiety, low acceptance level, and low level of self-confidence in matters related to their body image (Khor et al., 2009; Wong & Say, 2013). This is certainly surprising as 67% of these participants admitted that they have been body shamed at least once in their lives. Moreover, 19.8% (second highest percentage) perceived this issue as not serious at all. This is rather shocking as despite being the victims of body shaming, more than half of them believed that they could manage and handle the situation well. These findings are significant as they could either suggest that these adolescents were in a healthy state of mind or otherwise, these were early signs of depression.

Studies have shown that for males, their emotional awareness and sadness were prohibited by a collection of the masculine ideals embedded in them by society which led them to display higher level of self-control (OliFFE & Phillips, 2008, as cited in Ogrodniczuk & OliFFE, 2011). Whereas for females, the tendency to having self-control is lower, yet depressed people in general have the capacity to suppress their emotions. According to Riddle (2020), when it comes to depression, the DAD effect is commonly present – Depression, Addiction and Denial. Several common emotional coping skills found in children were keeping their sadness inside, passing judgements on others or making fun of others and suppressing how they truly feel. The results show that 52.8% of the participants admitted to simply ignore the negative remarks on their bodies. Riddle (2020) further mentioned that avoiding emotions keeps people from processing the traumatic experience. While it is assuring to know that the participants perceived body shaming as a manageable issue, it is pertinent for the institution to also verify whether their emotions are truly stable. Otherwise, these were merely signs of unhealthy minds that if left untreated, could further lead to more serious repercussion such as having suicidal thoughts.

5.2 Factors and Effects of Body Shaming

Based on the present data, majority of the undergraduate (67%) have been body shamed. However, the respondents reported that the issue is manageable. Sugiyati (2019) established that body shaming treatments were delivered in the form of insults, derision, innuendo, and making a mockery of the victim. The treatment had a variety of effects on the conduct of students, including tension, embarrassment, lack of confidence, and insecurity. Nonetheless, the impact of body shaming is not excessively detrimental to environmental action. In practise, body shaming influences the individual. The effect is visible in a behavioural pattern. Behaviour is the outward manifestation of a reaction to a trigger (Mahyarni, 2013). As reported in Table 5, there was a significant association between factors of body shaming and effects of body shaming as the behavioural tendency is visible openly because of society's body shaming. Stress, despair, worry, inferiority, and even anti-social behaviour are all manifestations of these behaviours. Due to their inferiority and fear of social judgement and unfavourable responses from others such as critiques or derision, victims are likely to avoid social contact as much as possible (Duarte et al., 2017).

Additionally, the present study shows that body shaming prevalence is more common among females. It is known that women internalise these social viewpoints directed at them, causing them to feel self-conscious and prone to fret about their own physical appearance in general (Yen et al., 2014). They will feel dissatisfied or even guilty if they are unable to live up to societal expectations and standards in society (Kessler, 2010). Individuals who have been subjected to body shaming will constantly feel as though something is missing in their lives, even though their lives are totally normal. Body shame is inextricably linked to Dorian and Garfinkel's (2002) comparison social theory, which explains how someone will compare their situation to another that they believe is perfect. This comparing exercise will cause someone to have a negative attitude toward themselves. They will become accustomed to monitoring and regulating their physical appearance.

Young adults are the most likely to suffer body shaming, which makes them feel inferior and anxious about their appearance and physical appearance (Moya-Garófano et al., 2019). This present study focuses on body shaming among undergraduates. They are diploma students who come from diverse origins and have varying physical appearances. This condition is likely to result in a body shaming practise, particularly among students, which will influence their academic performance.

5.3 Students' Perception on Institution's Intervention on Body Shaming

Gani and Jalal (2020) investigated the individuals' reactions to the body shaming treatment they received. The research is descriptive quantitative in nature. The data were gathered via a questionnaire survey about adolescent attitudes toward body shaming treatment and were evaluated statistically. They observed that while psychoeducation can increase a subject's awareness of body shaming, it is less effective at instilling assertive conduct in the subject to shield them from body shaming.

Thus, in an era prevalent with instances of body shaming, undergraduates must work hard to develop and maintain a healthy self-concept to retain a positive attitude. Based on the statistics from Table 6, most of the participants (55.1%) were mostly uncertain of where or to whom should the body shaming incident be reported. However, due to their ability to respond positively to themselves and appreciate their body shape, they will have a good attitude toward ridicule or comments from their environment about their bodies.

54.3% of the participants believed that their institution would intervene in the body shaming issue to resolve it. The students can be assisted through psychoeducation regarding body shaming. Morgan and Vera (2011) define psychoeducation as a method of psychological intervention by people, groups, and communities that tries to impart knowledge as a means of preventing and treating mental diseases by converting maladaptive conduct to adaptive behaviour. Additionally, Brown (2003) adds that the objective of psychoeducation is to empower and develop individuals through education relating to specific information utilised to increase wellbeing.

6. Conclusion

The present study uncovered body shaming issues among undergraduates and how they perceive their educational institution's intervention regarding body shaming cases occurring on campus. The findings provide a novel perspective to explore body shaming issues among undergraduates and expand the scope of interventions provided by the institutions. Some

limitations in the present study should be noted. First, the respondents are from diploma programmes, hence the findings cannot be directly linked to data generalisation. Future research into the prevalence of body shaming among undergraduates should involve the participation of degree students as well. Second, future study might also benefit from discussing body shaming intervention programmes throughout time to ascertain their effectiveness. Cross-sectional research is a useful initial step to explore the associations between body shaming and institutional intervention. A longitudinal and experimental studies are needed to explore the relationship.

Despite significant limitations to the conclusions obtained, this study provides encouraging evidence for the critical nature of institutional intervention, particularly for students experiencing severe body shame. Given the harmful implications of body image dissatisfaction, it is critical that future research continues to influence the development, evaluation, and dissemination of body image therapies.

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Conflict of Interest

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