



Malaysian Undergraduates' Perceptions of Body Image and Body Shaming

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Abstract : Body image and body shaming involving youths have been prevalent issues for quite some time. Youths namely are frequent targets of body shaming. In this study, University Teknologi MARA Perlis undergraduates' view on body image and their perceptions of body shaming were discussed. The objectives of the study are: to identify the undergraduates' perceptions of body image and body shaming, to identify the undergraduates' opinions of other people's body image and to identify how the undergraduates react to people's opinions of their body image. The following theory, i.e. sociocultural theory, guided this study. The respondents involved in this study were 227 semester 3, comprising of 143 female and 84 male, diploma level students of University Teknologi MARA Perlis. The data collection technique employed in this study was questionnaire whereby the respondents had been asked to complete the questionnaire via Google Form. The findings indicate that the respondents perceived ideal weight is important as it can boost a person's confidence. It was also found that most respondents did not have negative view or perception on other people's body image. It was also found that other people's opinions of their body image had certain effects on the respondents and most of them tried to change themselves for the better.

Keywords – Body Image, Body Shaming, Youths, Sociocultural theory

I. INTRODUCTION

Youths' perceptions of body image and the practice of body shaming are aspects of social that needs attention. Body shaming has become a norm and even casually committed online. Body image and body shaming are interrelated and these have become prevalence not only among teenagers but adults alike. Both genders have experience a fair share of body shaming at least once in their life time. Body Shaming is apparent in adolescents as with the growing trends of diets, exercise, and fashion portrayed in the social media (Saxena, Mathur & Jain, 2020).

The aim of the present study was to understand undergraduates' view on body image and their perceptions of body shaming. The following are the research objectives of this study:

- To identify the undergraduates' perceptions of body image and body shaming
- To identify the undergraduates' opinions of other people's body image
- To identify how the undergraduates react to people's opinions of their body image

Therefore, this paper will discuss the following research questions:

- RQ 1: What are undergraduates' perceptions of body image and body shaming?
 RQ 2: What are undergraduates' opinions of other people's body image?
 RQ 3: How do undergraduates react to people's opinions of their body image?

Findings from this study can help various state holders, namely counsellors and Student Affairs Department at the universities and colleges to address this matter and be more sensitive towards their students who are dealing with body shaming issues and provide proper guidance for the students involved.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

As the aim of the present study was to understand undergraduates' view on body image and their perceptions of body shaming, sociocultural theory was chosen to guide this study. As stated by Rodgers (2016), sociocultural theory has emerged as one of the principal frameworks that conceptualized body image and eating related problems. She continued by stating that individuals adopt the standard of beauty and slenderness set by the society and internalize these ideals as their own. Consequently, appearance comparison plays a significant role in the effect of sociocultural influences on body image and eating problems (Rodgers, 2016).

Izydorczyk and Sitnik-Warchulska (2018) identified that regardless of age and BMI values, in pursuit of thinness, sociocultural appearance standards played a major role and the researchers concluded that the young female adolescents (aged 12 – 20) had the highest tendency in developing eating disorder due to sociocultural influence.

As suggested by sociocultural theorists, when individuals compare their perceived appearance with the appearance of the person they imagined or idealized, anxiety over their own body image occurs (Teoh, 2000).

A study on 160 Chinese and 161 Croatian women was conducted and it was found that regardless of their cultural identity, these women had a high level of body image dissatisfaction as thin-ideal internalization was exposed to them (Stojcic, Dong & Ren, 2020). These Chinese women scored higher scores compared to the Croatian women on the thin-ideal internalization as they received more pressure from their family members, friends, and media to conform to standard beauty norms.

Simmons, Connell, Ulrich, Skinner, Balasubramanian and Gropper (2011) indicated that body image is connected to a sense of identity and there is strong evidence that negative body images are increasing in both genders. This can also be seen in Shahi and Kohli (2019) as they stated that body image issues also occurred among male students. However, both genders have different internalization of body image where female students idolized thinness whereas muscularity for the male students.

Teoh (2000) conducted a study on 69 female adolescents and it was found that there was a discrepancy between perceived body shape and idealized body shape, anxiety of the shape of parts of the body exist and results in lowered self-worth.

A study conducted by Janes (2017) on perceptions of body image among male college students and based on the one-on-one interviews, his study revealed that the most influential factor in the participants' view on body image was the reliance on others in establishing normalcy in social environments. In addition, their interaction with the others at their place of residence influenced them on their health behaviors and the way they described their bodies.

Another study done by Novitasari and Hamid (2021) indicated that 53% out of 168 adolescents in a public school in Indonesia had negative body image. It was concluded in the study that body image is linked to self-efficacy which is connected to the coping strategies among the adolescents who had experience body shaming.

Gam, Kumar Singh, Manar, Kumar Kar and Gupta (2020), in their study conducted on 200 adolescent participants, 44.9% indicated that they had been body shamed.

III. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Respondents

The number of respondents for this study was 227 semester 3, diploma level students, comprising of 143 female and 84 male. Their current weight range from 40-44 kg, 45-49 kg, 50-54 kg, 55-59 kg, 60-64 kg, 65-69 kg, 70-74 kg, 75-79 kg, 80-84 kg, 85-89 kg and above 90 kg. Their height range from below 150 cm, 150-155cm, 156-160cm, 161-170cm, 171-175cm, 176-180cm and above 180cm.

Table 1 Participants' Gender Breakdown

Gender	Number of participant	Percentage
Female	143	63.0
Male	84	37.0
Total	227	100.0

Table 2 Participants' Weight Range

Current Weight	Number of participant	Percentage
40 -44 kg	24	10.6
45 - 49 kg	32	14.1
50 - 54 kg	40	17.6
55 - 59 kg	30	13.2
60 - 64 kg	25	11.0
65 - 69 kg	20	8.8
70 - 74 kg	17	7.5
75 - 79 kg	9	4.0
80 - 84 kg	13	5.7
85 - 89 kg	7	3.1
Above 90 kg	10	4.4

Table 3 Participants' Height Range

Height	Number of participant	Percentage
Below 150 cm	13	5.7
150 - 155 cm	31	13.7
156 - 160 cm	60	26.4
161 - 170 cm	79	34.8
171 - 175 cm	28	12.3
176 - 180 cm	10	4.4
Above 180 cm	6	2.6
Total	227	100.0

3.2 Data Collection Technique

The data collection technique employed in this study was questionnaire whereby the respondents had been asked to complete the questionnaire via Google Form.

There were 50 questions in the Google Form where the respondents were required to answer. 38 questions had options for the respondents to choose from as their response. There were also 12 open-ended questions that respondents need to elaborate on. In this paper, only the findings with regard to undergraduates' perceptions of body image and body shaming, undergraduates' opinions of other people's body image and undergraduates' reaction to people's opinions of their body image will be discussed.

IV. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings are discussed based on the Research Questions.

RQ 1: What are undergraduates' perceptions of body image and body shaming?

The findings indicated that 100 respondents believed that they are of ideal weight. Whereas, 88 respondents believed that they are overweight and 39 respondents believed that they are underweight.

Table 4

Do you believe that you are over, under or the ideal weight?	Number of participant	Percentage
I think I am of ideal weight	100	44.1
I think I am overweight	88	38.8
I think I am underweight	39	17.2

The breakdown based on gender is 35 male respondents believed that they are of ideal weight. However, 32 male respondents believed that they are overweight and 17 respondents believed that they are underweight. The breakdown based on gender is 65 female respondents believed that they are of ideal weight. However, 56 female respondents believed that they are overweight and 22 respondents believed that they are underweight.

Table 5

Do you believe that you are over, under or the ideal weight?	Gender			
	Male	%	Female	%
I think I am of ideal weight	35	15.4	65	28.6
I think I am overweight	32	14.1	56	24.7
I think I am underweight	17	7.5	22	9.7

Responding to the questions, "Do you believe the majority of women feel the need to be the ideal weight to be happy?", 149 respondents indicated 'yes', 47 respondents indicated 'no' and 31 respondents indicated 'unsure'. It can be concluded that majority of the respondents believed that the majority of women feel the need to be the ideal weight to be happy.

Table 6

5. Do you believe the majority of women feel the need to be the ideal weight to be happy?	Number of participant	Percentage
Yes	149	65.6
No	47	20.7
Unsure	31	13.7
Total	227	100.0

Below are sample excerpts to illustrate the respondents' responses for the open-ended questions that required them to elaborate on.

Respondent 1:

Some view skinny or normal BMI as the beauty standards and once one fits in that standard, we will be happy.

Respondent 2:

Women want to be the ideal weight because of they think their body are not the ideal body shape, they also always want to compare with other people. That's why they feel the need to be the ideal weight.

Respondent 3:

Because they will feel more confident with themselves if they achieve the ideal weight.

Respondent 4:

Because when one's weight is their ideal weight, pretty sure they would be confident with themselves, with their body shape to be exact. When one is confident, they will no longer feel the insecurities. They can dress up whatever they wish. They feel good about their body. When one is happy with their ideal weight, they are most likely to get compliments. WHO DOESN'T LOVE COMPLIMENT? EVERYONE LOVES COMPLIMENT, ESPECIALLY US GIRLS. Period!

Respondent 5:

Yes because when we have ideal weight, people will not judge us and we will live in positives vibes.

Respondent 6:

Because women care about how people see and judge them in public. That might cause a psychological issues for them if their body are not in ideal weight.

Based on the excerpts above, it can be concluded that the respondents perceived ideal weight is important as it can boost a person's confidence.

The breakdown based on gender, in responding to the question, "Do you believe the majority of women feel the need to be the ideal weight to be happy?", 53 male and 96 female respondents indicated 'yes', 21 male and 26 female respondents indicated 'no' and 10 male and 21 female respondents indicated 'unsure'. It can be concluded that majority of the respondents, even based on gender, believed that the majority of women feel the need to be the ideal weight to be happy.

Table 7

5. Do you believe the majority of women feel the need to be the ideal weight to be happy?	Gender			
	Male	%	Female	%
Yes	53	23.3	96	42.3
No	21	9.3	26	11.5
Unsure	10	4.4	21	9.3

Responding to the question, "Do you have an image or expectation on how a 'perfect' body should look like?", below are some sample excerpts to illustrate their responses.

Respondent 1:

Based on perfection ways, for men it's has a six pack and same goes to women like S body shape.

Respondent 2:

Tall, body have a beautiful curve and proportion, and average muscle, not too flashy and bulky.

Respondent 3:

I'm kind of overweight, according to my BMI. As for me, I just really wish to have a normal weight. Perfect body to me, is not having belly fats. Big thighs. Having smaller calves. Having thigh gap.

Respondent 4:

A perfect body is when everything is small, small waist, small thigh, small leg, no tummy.

Respondent 5:

For me personally, my ideal body for men is not too buff but not too skinny, same goes to the women, not too skinny or too chubby.

Respondent 6:

A perfect body has the weight around 50 kg and their height is around 155-160cm.

Based on the excerpts above, it can be concluded that the respondents have certain specific image or expectation on how a 'perfect' body should look like.

RQ 2: What are undergraduates' opinions of other people's body image?

Responding to the above Research Question, 53 respondents out of 227 respondents admitted that they had intentionally or unintentionally body-shamed others on campus. Most of the respondents indicated that the main motive for their action was harmless as it was meant to be a joke without any ill-feeling. Only several of the respondents stated that it was intended to make the other person change his/her physical shortcomings.

It can be concluded that most respondents did not have negative view or bad perception on other people's body image.

RQ 3: How do undergraduates react to people's opinions of their body image?

72 respondents out of 227 respondents stated that they have experienced being body-shamed by others on campus. Most of the respondents mentioned that they ignored the comments and continue as usual. Several of them felt upset and started changing themselves.

Responding to the question "Please elaborate on the experience by providing information on when such incident(s) took place, where such incident(s) took place and who was or were involved, etc.", below are some sample excerpts to illustrate their responses.

Respondent 1:

There is one time, my lecturer asked the whole class (my class and another 3 classes) to meet her at her room. The hallway is quite small for all of us, when I was walking towards my lecturer's room, there's one boy who said loudly "Weh, weh, here he comes. All make way for him to pass. The space would not be enough for us all", and the others laughed at his "joke".

Respondent 2:

When entering the campus, my BMI is underweight so most of my friends said that I look too skinny. So, I took the initiative to increase my meal portion everyday until my weight reach 55kg, along with regularly exercises routine for every weekend.

Respondent 3:

I did feel upset and I TRIED to change myself but it keeps getting harder. I always feel like to give up but I know it is really a waste of time if I give up now. I am still young and have to be happy so that is why I need to be skinny so I can feel happy for myself.

Respondent 4:

My classmate said 'kepala kecil' large head, 'badan besar' huge body, and I'm very touched, I can't stop crying and I don't want to go to class. I feel like I want to quit from UiTM (Universiti Teknologi MARA).

Respondent 5:

It happened while I was eating with a roommate in our room in 2019 at UiTM (Universiti Teknologi MARA) Arau. Suddenly they said that my body was getting fatter. From then on, I did my best to lose weight and I continued to do exercises to get a fit body.

Respondent 6:

This one girl said to me that I'm less masculine because I'm overweight and do not look attractive, then I went to gym and workout and start eating healthy and now she comes crawling.

Based on the above responses, it can be concluded that the incident had certain effects on the respondents and most of them tried to change themselves for the better.

V. CONCLUSION

The findings of this study showed that the respondents perceived ideal weight as important since ideal weight is perceived as a boost to one's confidence. It was also found that most respondents did not have negative view or bad perception on other people's body image. It was also discovered that other people's opinions of their body image had definite effects on the respondents and most of them tried to change themselves for the better. The findings of this study therefore correlate with the findings in the studies conducted by Novitasari and Hamid (2021) and Gam, Kumar Singh, Manar, Kumar Kar and Gupta (2020). To conclude, this study has shown that sociocultural theory of body image is applicable to this sample of respondents.

It is recommended that for future research, students from Form Six Colleges, Community Colleges and Matriculation Colleges in the northern region of the country to take part in the study on youths' perceptions of body image and body shaming as to yield broader results with regard to this topic.

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