

Experiences with body shaming in first-year students at Pham Ngoc Thach University of Medicine and associated factors

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Abstract

Background: Body shaming is gradually becoming a matter of concern as ridicule regardless of age or gender is gradually becoming more common in the community. This cross-sectional study was conducted to investigate the prevalence and related factors of mocking about appearance for freshmen at Pham Ngoc Thach University of Medicine in 2021.

Method: 328 students from 9 majors at Pham Ngoc Thach University of Medicine were recruited in 2021 – 2022. Statistical analysis included Chi-square tests and logistic regression models to identify factors associated with body shaming and The body shaming variable was measured through self-report regarding whether or not the participant experienced body shaming over the past year.

Results: The prevalence of body shaming was found to be 33.2%, among these, weight-related teasing was the most common type, accounting for 67%. Related factors include BMI and weight of women, type of family, low self-esteem and feeling about high school.

Conclusion: The study determined the prevalence of body shaming and its associated factors. This is the first study to investigate the prevalence of body shaming among university students and its associated factors in this population, and thus, it may serve as a useful reference for future research.

Keywords: Body shaming, associated factors, adolescents

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1. INTRODUCTION

Cultural exchange worldwide has established certain standards applied to almost everything, from fashion to individual appearance. Each era, nation, and society has its own definition of beauty. Bullying behaviors related to appearance are commonly referred to as “body shaming,” which may be translated as “appearance-based ridicule” or “appearance-related discrimination.” The term “body shaming” describes the act of mocking individuals whose appearance is considered different from societal norms [1].

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), adolescence extends from 10 to 19 years of age [2], a sensitive period characterized by numerous physical, psychological, and social changes. Pubertal changes in body structure, weight, and hormonal balance influence adolescents’ physical appearance [3]. During this developmental stage, physical growth, cognitive maturation, and psychosocial transitions make adolescents more self-conscious about their own appearance as well as that of their peers. Consequently, appearance-based comparisons and ridicule

are almost inevitable. Prolonged body shaming during adolescence, particularly from peers, may have lasting negative impacts [4], including adverse effects on mental health [5-10], social integration [11] and potentially more serious consequences in adulthood [12-14].

Global studies have reported associations between body mass index (BMI), height, weight, peer networks, and experiences of body shaming, with prevalence ranging from 44.9% [15] to 58% [16]. However, in Vietnam, research on this issue remains limited, creating a significant knowledge gap regarding the prevalence and associated factors of body shaming among university students. Therefore, this study was conducted to provide additional empirical data on body shaming among Vietnamese students. Specifically, this research sought to answer the following research questions: 1) What is the prevalence of first-year students at Pham Ngoc Thach University of Medicine who have ever experienced or are currently experiencing body shaming?, 2) What factors are associated with experiencing body shaming among first-year students at Pham Ngoc Thach University of Medicine?. Accordingly, the study was to determine the prevalence of experiencing body shaming in first-year students at Pham Ngoc Thach University of Medicine and its associated factors.

2. METHODS

2.1. Study design and participants

This cross-sectional study was conducted from April to November 2022 among first-year students at Pham Ngoc Thach University of Medicine, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, with data collected between May and June 2022. Eligible participants were Vietnamese nationals aged 18 to <20 years, while students who were absent during the

interview period were excluded. The required sample size was calculated using the formula.

$$n = \frac{z_{1-\alpha/2}^2 p(1-p)}{d^2}$$

Where n was the required sample size; was 1.96 according to a 95% confidence interval; P was 44.9% (the percentage of people who experienced body shaming, according to the study by Rahul Taye Gam and colleagues (India, 2020); and d was 0.05 (a margin of error). Finally, considering a 10% exclusion rate of invalid responses, the minimum sample size required for this study was 328 participants.

2.2. Sampling method

The study employed a Multistage Sampling technique. Stage 1 involved Proportional Stratified Sampling, and Stage 2 utilized Simple Random Sampling within each stratum. However, due to the actual response rate failing to meet the quota in several classes, compensatory sampling was conducted from other classes to ensure the minimum required sample size for the study was achieved.

2.3. Study variables:

Sociodemographic variables (gender (such as male/female/other), religion (the religious beliefs that the participant follows, such as Catholicism, Buddhism, etc.), ethnicity (such as Kinh, Hoa, etc.), number of close friends (the total number of close friends the participant had over the past year), family type (the type of generational household the participant lives in two generations or more than two generations), BMI (Body mass index (BMI) was defined as body weight in kilograms divided by height in meters squared), weight (kg), height(cm)) and psychological factors (school-related emotions (the feelings toward their high school, which could be liking or disliking the school), low self-esteem (measured by

the participant's self-assessment of feeling self-conscious/insecure about their appearance)) were examined for associations with body shaming (The body shaming variable will be collected through self-report regarding the experience of body shaming over the past year.)

2.4. Data collection method:

Data were collected using an online self-administered questionnaire distributed via Google Forms, adapted from the instrument developed by Rahul Taye Gam et al [15] and translated for the Vietnamese context. After the study protocol was approved, a pilot test was conducted on 26 students for refinement and to ensure the clarity and reliability of the questionnaire. For data collection, the survey link was distributed, and students were required to log in with their university-provided email

accounts to complete the online form.

2.5. Data processing and analysis

Data entry was performed using Microsoft Excel. Data were analyzed with IBM SPSS Statistics version 26. Descriptive statistics, including frequencies and percentages were calculated for categorical variables. Means and standard deviations were calculated for continuous variables. Analytical statistics, including Chi-square test and logistic regression models were used to examine associations.

2.6. Ethical considerations

The study protocol was reviewed and approved by the Ethical Council of the Faculty of Public Health, Pham Ngoc Thach University of Medicine, under Decision No. 3296/QĐ-TĐHTKPNT dated May 26, 2022, issued by the Rector of Pham Ngoc Thach University of Medicine

3. RESULT

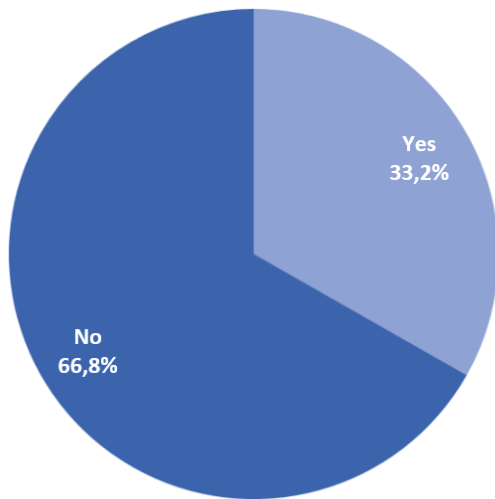


Chart 1. Prevalence of students who have ever experienced or are currently experiencing body shaming

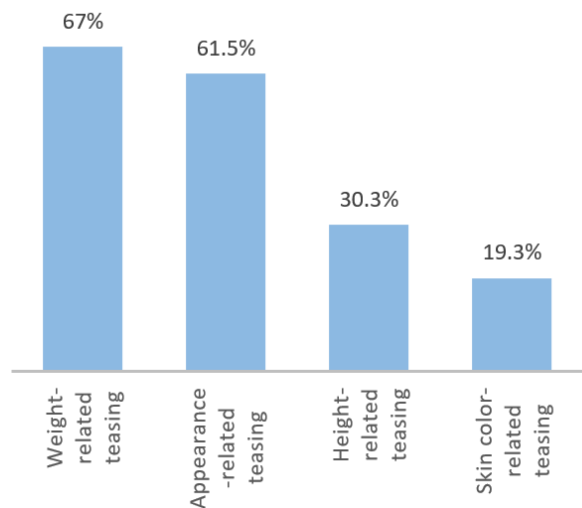


Chart 2. Prevalence of students subjected to different types of body shaming

The prevalence of first-year students at Pham Ngoc Thach University of Medicine who had ever experienced or were currently experiencing body shaming within the past year was 33.2% (equivalent to 109 students). Among these, weight-related teasing was the most common type, accounting for 67%.

Table 1. Bivariate analyses of the association between study participant characteristics and body shaming status

Factors	Body shaming		p
	Yes n (%)	No n (%)	
Type of family (n=328)			
2 generations	84 (30.9)	188 (69.1)	0.047
>2 generations	25 (44.6)	31 (55.4)	
Female weight (n=216)			
< 53kg	38 (29.9)	89 (70.1)	0.015
≥ 53kg	41 (46.1)	48 (53.9)	
Male weight (n=112)			
< 68kg	14 (23.7)	45 (76.3)	0.441
≥ 68kg	16 (30.2)	37 (69.8)	
Self-esteem (n=328)			
Yes	104 (41.9)	144 (58.1)	<0.001
No	5 (6.2)	75 (93.8)	
Feelings toward high school (n=328)			
Dislike	44 (44.9)	54 (55.1)	0.003
Like	65 (28.3)	165 (71.7)	

Table 1 analyzes the factors related to participants' characteristics affecting body shaming using the Chi-square test. The results showed that factors associated with being body shamed included type of family ($p=0.047$), female weight ($p=0.015$), self-esteem ($p<0.001$), and feelings toward high school ($p=0.003$).

Table 2. Association between gender and skin color-related body shaming

Gender (n=109)	Skin color-related teasing		POR (95% CI)	p
	Yes n (%)	No n (%)		
Male	2 (6.7)	28 (93.3)	4.433 (0.965 – 20.362)	0.04
Female	19 (24.1)	60 (75.9)		

Table 2 analyzes the association between skin color-related body shaming and gender. The results indicate that gender ($p=0.04$) is a significant factor associated with skin color-related body shaming. Specifically, female students were 4.433 times more likely to experience body shaming related to skin color compared to male students (95% CI: 0.965–20.362).

Table 3. Logistic regression model of factors associated with body shaming

Variables	Univariate logistic regression		Multivariate logistic regression	
	POR (95% CI)	p	Adjusted POR (95% CI)	p
Type of family (N=328)				
2 generations				
>2 generations	1.805 (1.004 – 3.244)	0.048	Removed from the model	
Female weight (N=216)				
< 53kg				
≥ 53kg	2.001 (1.138 – 3.516)	0.016	1.778 (0.964 – 3.278)	0.065
Self-esteem (N=328)				
Yes				
No	0.092 (0.36 – 0.236)	<0.001	0.109 (0.04 – 0.296)	<0.001
Feelings toward high school (N=328)				
Dislike				
Like	0.483 (0.296 – 0.79)	0.004	0.386 (0.199 – 0.747)	0.005

Table 3 analyzes the association between body shaming and influencing factors using univariate logistic regression. The results showed that individuals living in families with more than two generations were 1.805 times more likely to experience body shaming compared to those living in two-generation families (95% CI: 1.004–3.244). Among females, those weighing ≥ 53 kg were twice as likely to experience body shaming compared to those weighing < 53 kg (95% CI: 1.138–3.516). Participants without low self-esteem were 0.092 times less likely to experience body shaming than those with low self-esteem (95% CI: 0.036–0.236). Additionally, students who reported liking their high school had a 0.483-fold lower likelihood of experiencing body shaming compared to those who did not (95% CI: 0.296–0.790).

4. DISCUSSION

The findings of this study showed that 33.2% of students had experienced body shaming (BS). This prevalence was lower than that reported by Rahul Taye Gam et al. in India (2020) 44.9% [15] and by Elsa Novitasari et al. in Indonesia (2021) (58%) [16]. The discrepancy may be explained by differences in study populations in the study of Rahul Taye Gam et al., and by a large sample size variation in the study of Elsa Novitasari et al.

The most common form of BS identified among first-year students was weight-related shaming (67%). This proportion was more than twice as high as that reported by Rebecca M. Puhl et al. in the United States (2013) 29% [17]. The

difference may be attributable to cultural variations across countries and the period in which the studies were conducted. This suggests that weight is a particularly sensitive issue among Vietnamese students, given that contemporary social norms regard slimness as an ideal of beauty [8] and, over time, this ideal has become a socially accepted standard [1].

Furthermore, the study found that females were four times more likely to experience skin color-related BS than males. In Vietnam, women have long been subjected to beauty standards such as “slim figure first, skin second, and face third” [18]. Historically, skin tone has been an important criterion in evaluating female beauty. In contrast, for men, having a strong

and muscular body is more highly valued [19], thus, darker skin is often associated with masculinity. Moreover, men are generally more physically active and more engaged in sports, which may also contribute to having darker skin.

With regard to factors associated with BS, the study demonstrated a statistically significant association between body weight and BS among females: those weighing ≥ 53 kg were twice as likely to experience BS compared to those weighing < 53 kg. This result was consistent with the findings of Rahul Taye Gam et al. in India (2020), which identified a significant association for women weighing ≥ 50 kg [15].

Based on the study conducted by Rahul Taye Gam and colleagues in India (2020) [15], the results of the present research show a difference, indicating that individuals living in households with more than two generations were 1.805 times more likely to experience body shaming compared to those living in two-generation households. This discrepancy may be attributed to cultural differences between the two countries. In Vietnam, beauty standards have continuously changed over time, from the past to the present [18] leading to variations in perceptions of appearance between generations. However, in the final multivariate regression model, this association was no longer significant, possibly because, when considered alongside other factors, the household type variable was not strong enough to maintain the association.

The study also revealed that feelings of affection toward one's high school were associated with the likelihood of experiencing body shaming. Specifically, students who expressed positive feelings toward their high school were 0.386 times less likely to report body shaming compared to those who expressed negative

feelings. This may be explained by the different coping strategies individuals adopt when facing body shaming, such as feelings of discomfort (35.8%), psychological distress (20.2%), or social withdrawal (13.8%). Notably, 70% of body shaming incidents originated from classmates. Given the long hours of daily interaction at school, individuals who experienced body shaming were more likely to develop negative feelings toward their high school.

In addition, this study has certain limitations. The use of an online questionnaire may have led to information bias. Moreover, translation of the questionnaire could have introduced wording inconsistencies, potentially causing difficulties for participants in understanding the items. Nonetheless, to minimize such errors, the questionnaire was pilot-tested before official implementation. However, the study also possesses certain notable strengths regarding its novelty, as it represents the first research to investigate the prevalence and associated factors of body shaming among first-year medical students at Pham Ngoc Thach University of Medicine, and in Vietnam generally, thereby providing valuable reference data for future studies

5. CONCLUSION

The study found that the prevalence of first-year students at Pham Ngoc Thach University of Medicine who had ever experienced or were currently experiencing body shaming was 33.2%. Statistically significant associations were observed between body shaming and the following variables: household type, body weight among female students, self-esteem, and feelings toward high school. However, in the multivariate logistic regression model, the household type variable was excluded. This is the first study to investigate the

prevalence of body shaming among university students and its associated factors in this population, and thus, it may serve as a useful reference for future research. Given these findings, necessary recommendations are suggested: Universities should establish free psychological counseling centers and integrate mental wellness into the curriculum; policies should be considered to implement specific disciplinary guidelines to penalize body shaming behavior; and victims should be encouraged to build self-love and seek help from trusted sources.

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