

Body-shaming among Gym-Goers: Lived Experiences of Filipino Young Adult Men

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Abstract

Various factors affect why people exercise and go to the gyms (e.g., physical, mental, etc.), or what makes them stay and continue with it. Body-shaming is common in the Philippines even prior to COVID-19, regardless of gender. Body-shaming is defined as mocking someone's body, in which its humiliation causes emotional distress; and, body-shaming among men is rarely discussed. Using the phenomenological research design, this study aims to understand the lived experiences of Filipino young adult gym-going men on body-shaming. Six (6) Filipino young adult men (18-25 years old) residing in Manila were interviewed individually. They are all identified as gym-goers and reported to have faced body-shaming. Qualitative data was analyzed using the interpretative phenomenological analysis. It used a semi-structured interview as collection method in which data were analyzed through Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). Results show that the body-shaming experienced by the Filipino young adult men may be a source of motivation to the gym-going participants, despite the negative feelings they have towards body-shaming. The data also reveal eleven (11) themes that summarize the lived experiences of the participants about body-shaming. This was categorized into two: the forms of body-shaming, and the responses to it.

Keywords: body-shaming, exercise, gym-goers, Filipino young adult men, Sports Psychology



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INTRODUCTION

An act or practice of expressing embarrassment over the body shape or size of another individual is known as body shaming. It is a type of bullying that can cause serious emotional harm, particularly among children. Body shaming is practiced among family, companions, foes, and classmates. discrimination based on a person's bodily form or size. The attacker does not necessarily aim to cause damage to the victim, yet the victim interprets the statement as negative, derogatory, or body-shaming. (Schlüter et al., 2021). Body shaming affects the mental health of the individual, including low self-esteem, anxiety, and depression.

In addition, body shaming is being established as a source of shame, embarrassment, and humiliation affecting mental health and wellbeing. Body shaming may cause an individual to feel ashamed of himself in relation to the concept of *puri* at *dangal* in Filipino psychology, which can lead to feelings of avoidance and isolation (MindShift

Psychological Services, 2021). According to Pe-Pua and Protacio-Marcelino (2000), *dangal* is the internal honor or the person's "true worth, character, achievement, and success," while *puri* is the honor of the external based on achievements and successes. These concepts are related to people's self-interest, which when criticized leads to negative psychological effects, like isolation and avoidance. Likewise, this experience is linked to poor mental well-being and feeling of shame (Gam et al., 2021). There are incidents wherein people experience body shaming from family members and friends (Escoton et al., 2023). These instances usually occur during family gatherings such as reunions, parties, and other special occasions wherein members of the family with distant relatives hang out together. Every adolescent girl and boy from a Filipino family is familiar with body shaming by family and relatives.

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, body shaming and weight discrimination were common, but its criticism and dietary demands have exacerbated the problem. Therefore, this body-shaming issue is not new. Body shaming has

become a widespread problem that many young adults face on a daily basis, even before the pandemic. During this COVID-19 pandemic, we cannot deny the fact that many people gained or lost weight, and there were significant changes to lifestyle and physical variations that became widespread concerns about body shaming (Sun, 2018). Unfortunately, it can also prolong the body shaming cycle by preserving unrealistic body images (Cole, 2021). Weight discrimination is an additional barrier for those individuals who have physical characteristics that do not meet the standards of society at a time when everyone is under stress. It also has substantial mental health effects for individuals afflicted (White, 2020).

Body shaming can occur both on social media and in real life. Social media has influenced or contributed to body discrimination by exposing people to "idealized" body types (Puluhulawa & Husain, 2021). Many publications, online platforms, and commercials contribute to body shaming in such a manner that mainstreams these harmful practices (Petro-Roy, n.d.).

It was revealed that in the present Philippine context, personal blogs and other social media platforms are prevalent to describe fat-shaming experiences. The current Filipino environment is both cruel and amusing towards "fat" and "*tabachoy*" folks, suggesting that a culture of fat shaming persists in Philippine society (Abello, 2019). In light of the fact that people are more familiar with the body shaming experience of women because it is the focus of most studies, there is less literature and research in the Philippines that focuses on the body shaming experience of men. Some studies claim that women experience being more dissatisfied with their bodies and more objectively (Voges et al., 2019).

Body discrimination against men is less discussed because many people fail to see that body shaming also victimizes men. Men too experience body shaming, but it is not as obvious as it should be, resulting in increased stigma for women about the expression of body image difficulties in men. It is well documented that women struggle with body image and body

shaming, but sadly, in men, body shaming has emerged in recent years (Edwards, 2019). Similarly, men are also victims of body shaming, although this point of view is mostly disregarded, especially when a male figure with abs is being portrayed.

Since the experience among male body-shaming (Edwards, 2019), specifically among gym-goers, has not been dealt comprehensively, there is a need to start with a more phenomenological understanding of this experience; thus, indicating the need to use phenomenological approach. The significance of this study is to know the lived experiences of Filipino young adult men, specifically gym goers and men, on body shaming and to make a positive change in stigmatizing attitudes and culture among the people in Metro Manila.

LITERATURES

Body Shaming and its Statistics. Body shaming is a one-time act wherein a person shares inappropriate comments and suggestions, the vast majority of which are unfavorable, regarding the body of another individual, such as size, shape, weight, body parts, body-related appearance, extremities, etc. (Schlüter et al., 2021).

Additionally, those who are closest to victims can engage in body shaming, which is why it frequently occurs unintentionally. Body shaming includes mocking an overweight or thin body, a black complexion, a pug, a short stature, chubby cheeks, and large or slanted eyes. Body image is the perception of the perfect body according to societal attractiveness standards (Maulani et al., 2022).

In a survey conducted by researchers from a mental health foundation in the United Kingdom in the past year, various positive and negative perceptions about one's physical characteristics were gathered: 21% of men and women adults felt pleased; 20% felt embarrassed; 34% felt dispirited; and 19% were grossed out about their body image.

Body Shaming: Female versus Male. In today's society, body shaming is more popular and prevalent among women, while male body image is rarely acknowledged. Body image is traditionally regarded as a "female issue." Some experts say that the reason women feel dissatisfied with their bodies is because of their exposure to social conditions; as a result, women are more frustrated with their bodies compared to men (Bradley University, n.d.). Additionally, when it comes to their own bodies, males place a lower value on non-ideal bodies and a higher value on ideal bodies, whereas women rate more objectively (Voges et al., 2019).

As the young adult women subsequently reported their current degrees of body shame, they received harmful comments about their weight from family members as adults. Apart from the fact that painful remarks from family members are frequently heard among young adult women, they also predict eating disorders despite being in control of prior eating disorder practices and having a history of receiving hurtful remarks (Flak, 2021).

COVID-19 and Body Shaming. Exposure to the public plays a crucial role in inducing social media shame. During COVID-19, unhealthy and illegal behavior showed itself in diverse forms and was broadcast on social media. This inappropriate behavior documented in photographs or videos is revealed, critiqued, and thus disseminated to a larger audience, culminating in internet shaming. In general, internet shaming has a major effect on behavior, which becomes more cautious as a result (Behera et al., 2022).

In the United Kingdom, the researchers assessed obese individuals who thought that they would get no medical care if hospitalized and were hence at a higher risk of death. The media had demonized them, they felt. The study revealed that people afflicted respond to the stigma with embarrassment; the higher risk of infection manifests itself in more body shame, and the confinement oneself induces anxiety about future weight gain. The circumstances increased their dread, stigma, and shame,

preventing them from trying to exercise or purchase foods with self-assurance as well as confidence (Le Brocq et al., 2020).

Factors that Influence Body Shaming: Social Media. Body shaming can occur both on social media and in real life and has the potential to have an impact on a person's mental health, social health, and professional life (Arumugam et al., 2022). Participants said that online body shaming is also possible.

One of the factors or influences on body shaming is the different social media networks. Due to the prevalence of insults and mockery on social media, body shaming has recently been a topic of widespread discussion. Nonetheless, this is still regarded as normal and underrated. Although body shaming could be classified as a kind of verbal harassment or bullying in reality (Jiotsa et al., 2021), social media exposes individuals to "idealized" body types, forcing them to compare themselves to them. Additionally, they established a linkage between body dissatisfaction, the desire to be skinny, and the frequency with which an individual compares their own physical appearance to that of social media followers (Jiotsa et al., 2021).

Furthermore, given that the usage of social media is so widespread and the number of trolls and harassments on social media is so high nowadays, the study must be conducted in a variety of settings in order to develop protective measures for preventing emotional and social trauma in students in professional educational institutions (Beevi & Nazeer, 2022).

Moreover, young adults are exposed to practically every social media platform, so it's crucial to convey knowledge about what's unpleasant and how they can adjust. With more beauty models and treatments for skin tone, weight loss, and acne, people may develop a negative body image (Jain, 2020).

Factors that Influence Body Shaming: Bullying. Another factor that influences body shaming is bullying. Body shaming is a kind of passive bullying that involves shouting a derogatory term or nickname. There are several negative

terms that fall under the body shaming category, including diatribe, mockery, satire, jokes, and neglect (Sugiati, 2019). There were three types of bullying: physical, verbal, and psychological. Body shaming is an example of oral bullying, also known as verbal bullying. In addition, body shaming is intentionally or unintentionally condemning or making negative responses about the physical appearance of an individual (Maulani et al., 2022).

With the understanding of how limited the available knowledge about the body-shaming experience of men, this study intends to establish their phenomenological experience using a qualitative research inquiry. This forms basis for the need to explore body-shaming among male gym-goers.

METHODS

This section presents the research design, locale, and instruments that was used in this study. It also included the study's population and sampling, data collection procedure, and method of analysis.

Research Design. Phenomenological qualitative research is used to understand and explain the universal core of a phenomenon. The method investigates the everyday experiences of individuals while suspending the researchers' preconceived beliefs about the phenomenon. The researchers have chosen phenomenology because they are gathering lived experiences of young adult Filipino men, specifically gym-goers and men, that would be relevant for the topic. It is appropriate to use this study to get the experiences of Filipino young adult men, specifically gym-goers and men, on a daily basis with regards to body shaming so that it can be explored.

Instrumentation. The researcher conducted a face-to-face, one-on-one semi-structured interview, or through the use of a series of open-ended questions and then probing their responses and the topic of interest further with probe questions. The researchers asked or interviewed the participants with the following questions: "What is your own experience with

body shaming?" "In what circumstances, if any, did that experience influence your way of living in either a positive or negative way?". Semi-structured interviews are flexible and allow the researchers to focus on the topic of interest while allowing them the freedom to explore any pertinent thoughts that may arise throughout the interview. It also encourages two-way communication by giving interviewers an opportunity to learn the responses to questions and the reasoning behind them, allowing responders time to disclose sensitive information, and providing qualitative data to compare to prior and future data.

Participants. The researchers used a non-probability sampling technique, specifically Purposive Sampling to look for respondents. The researchers interviewed six (6) Filipino young adults (18–25 years old) who have been going to the gym regularly for almost six months. Also, the participants interviewed was residing in Metro Manila. All participating respondents of the screening phase met the inclusion criteria.

Data Source. The researchers solicited the approval of the Research Ethics Committee of the university. Once approval was given, the researchers started collecting the data through interview. The researchers made publication materials (which include the criteria for choosing the participants) that were posted on social media (Facebook and Instagram), including the Google Form link for them to answer if they were interested in joining the study. All those who answered the Google form received an informed consent form for the data collection proper, including the agreement that the interview would be recorded via voice recording.

The participants were interviewed face-to-face. The setting of the interview was at the university, specifically in the discussion room of the library. This is to ensure the confidentiality of the interview process and the safety of both the researchers and the participants. There were two (2) researchers who are present in the same room or venue of the interview; one does the interview and the other overlooks the

whole process for quality assurance. The interview started with establishing rapport, and when the participants felt comfortable sharing, one of the researchers, who was the interviewer, asked the participants semi-structured questions based on the interview guide, and then the interviewer provided follow-up questions based on the participant's previous answers. In semi-structured interviews, individuals' experiences are investigated in depth. The interview proper lasted approximately one (1) hour each.

After the data had been collected, the researchers transcribed everything in the recording and analyzed it using interpretative phenomenological analysis. After the data had been analyzed, all the recordings and papers were destroyed to ensure the confidentiality of this study.

Data Analysis. Data analysis is a method of getting deep into the knowledge of data to have evidence regarding the conclusion. The researchers utilized Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to provide insights into how a specific individual, in a specific setting, makes sense of a specific circumstance (Smith, 2004). It also offers in-depth explorations of personal lived experience of body shaming in and outside the gym.

In this study, after transcribing the recorded data, the researchers started re-listening to the interview audio recording and reading & re-reading the transcripts, per research participant. After reading and re-reading (step 1) on their printed or digital copy of the transcripts, the researchers began coding by noting general initial message from the responses (step-2). The researchers began to identify emerging codes or common patterns from the sharing of the participants (step 3), whereas certain themes naturally group together while others are separated based on their differentiation (step 4). The process or steps were repeated for the other participants' answers in the semi-structured interview (step 5). Once the process was repeated to all the transcripts, the researchers came together to look for patterns across the themes of each

participant (step 6). From there, the researchers took interpretations to a deeper level (step 7).

Results

In the investigation of the lived experiences of Filipino young adult gym-going men about body-shaming and exercise, the researchers produced and came up with eleven (11) themes that summarizes the lived experiences of the participants, which are divided into two overarching focuses: forms of body shaming and responses to body-shaming.

Forms of Body-shaming. This focus explains the lived experience of body-shaming among gym-going men while examining how they navigate and endure different forms of criticism. It explores the social pressures and expectations placed on men to achieve certain body standards, which often leads to negative self-perception and psychological distress.

Table 1
Themes Summarizing the Forms of Body-shaming Experienced by Filipino Young Adult Gym-going Men

Themes	Discussions	Excerpt
<i>Biruan lang</i> [To joke]	The participants admitted that they are unaware that as children, they experienced body-shaming from their family, peers, and friends. It can be considered as a form of body-shaming since they do choose to stand by and let those around them continue degrading remarks and actions in a form of a joke towards their physical appearance, because they thought that being teased as children appears to them normal.	<i>"nung una hindi big deal sa akin pero alam ko na like inaasar talaga ako usually, yun talaga. [At first it wasn't a big deal to me, but I know that I'm usually really teased, that's it.]" - Participant 3</i> <i>"And siguro hindi mo naman siya iisipin dati nung bata na body-shaming yung ginagawa nila kaya parang normal lang halos yung asaran. [And maybe you wouldn't think about it before as a child that what they do is body-shaming, so it seems almost normal to be teased.]" - Participant 3</i>
<i>Pagkwestiyon sa hitsura</i> [Questioning one's self-image]	The participants shared how other people's criticisms and statements have contributed to their self-doubts on their appearance. Some participants have shared how it made them ask themselves if it was normal. People criticize them for their appearance, which can be viewed as a form of body-shaming.	<i>"Although as a kid kasi, you don't take it in too much, we take it as a joke. Naging norm na siya for us boys na mag asaran pero we never share usually kung ano nararamdaman natin towards those kind of jokes na we received. [Although as a kid, you don't take it in too much, we take it as a joke. It has become a norm for us boys to be teased, however, we never usually share what we feel towards those kinds of jokes that we received.]" - Participant 4</i> <i>"...I think it really affected my mental self image— yung self image ko, sa sarili ko, kasi like, until now i see myself as that overweight eh. [...] think it really affected my mental self image—my self-image, in them having doubts on their self-myself because like, until now i see myself as that overweight]" - Participant 2</i> <i>"Isipin mo na normal ka pa ba.. Or kailangan mo ba talaga maging fit para lang sa kanila para lang di ka ma body shame. [You'll think about whether you're still normal. Or do you really need to be fit just for them so you don't get body shamed]" - Participant 5</i>
<i>Pangungutya</i> [Name-calling]	It is a form of verbal bullying in which others target an individual with derogatory language or comments. Others also use their words to instill fear and obtain control over another individual. The participants have been verbally bullied from their childhood until the present either from family, friends or random people like calling names.	<i>"So I would get called out, I would hear names and everything na naasar ako dun [that pissed me off]." - Participant 4</i> <i>"I came from fat so hindi na ako tinatawag na "dodo man." [I came from fat so I'm not called "dodo man" anymore.]" - Participant 4</i> <i>"Taposssss yung mga kaklase ko inaasar ako na bigshow. [Then my classmates are teasing me people like calling names.]" - Participant 5</i>
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<i>Pisikalan</i> [Physical bullying]	The participants have revealed that in addition to being bullied verbally, they have also been subjected to body-shaming through the use of physical misconduct making physical bullying as one of the different forms of body-shaming.	<i>"ayun nabully paano ba yung bully na yun as in physical talaga ganon tas hanggang mga grade 10. [I'm being bullied, how is that bully as in physical, really, until about grade 10.]" - Participant 1</i> <i>"Physical talaga eh tapos syempre pag may physical may verbal na rin ganun. [It's really physical and then of course when there's physical there's also verbal like that.]" - Participant 1</i>
<i>Personal</i> [Personal attack]	During their body-shaming experience, the participants would, you look small, don't you? Your self-confidence shared that it affected their self-esteem. It is a form of body-shaming because of their experience of comparing themselves to others, and other people comparing them to others—targeting one's body shame ka ba nila ganyan. [I guess... it lowers your confidence and then really, you will have low esteem... so self-esteem changing to low. every time you do think about you actions you also will think if they tease you or if they will shame you like that.]" - Participant 5	<i>"Syempre ano ka, parang manliit ka diba, yung self-confidence mo parang... sasabihin mo na parang unang na sila ginawang ganito tas ikaw ganyan ganun. [of course, you would, you look small, don't you? Your self-confidence shared that it affected their self-esteem. It is a form of body-shaming because of their experience of comparing themselves to others, and other people comparing them to others—targeting one's body shame ka ba nila ganyan. [I guess... it lowers your confidence and then really, you will have low esteem... so self-esteem changing to low. every time you do think about you actions you also will think if they tease you or if they will shame you like that.]" - Participant 5</i>

The findings show varying responses of the male gym-goers as an experience to being body-shamed. They shared that it was common for them to compare their own body with others as wishful thinking to cope with the negative remarks they are experiencing. This also led them to develop negative evaluation of their body image.

However, in spite of the negative experiences the participants had, they also found other means to cope with the body shaming. Some of them chose to ignore the body-shaming they are experiencing, while others focus on things that would help them instead. This act of not letting the negative comments get into them resulted in realizations that what was happening was not okay and are forms of victimization. To move forward, all of them chose to look for ways to improve themselves, which included going to the gym.

DISCUSSION

Based on the findings of the gathered data in the lived experiences of Filipino young adult gym-going men about body-shaming, the researchers therefore conclude that the participants share the similar experiences with regards to body-shaming as seen in the eleven (11) themes that falls under the two (2) categories: (1) forms of body-shaming: *Biruan lang*: taking the remarks as humor, *Pangungutya*: the use of name-calling and pointing out the obvious of one's physical state to humiliate one's physique, *Pisikalan*: Body-shaming through the use of Physical Bullying, *Personal*: targeting one's insecurities, *Pagpuna sa hitsura*: messing up one's mental self-image; (2) Responses to body-shaming: *Anong meron sila na wala ako*: comparing one's body with others, *Ganito kasi ako*: negative evaluation towards body image, *Hayaan na lang sila*: Disregarding or ignoring one's body-shaming, *Pagbibigay pansin sa iba*: putting one's attention to what helps, *Hindi sana dapat: Should-not-have-been* realizations, *May pinatunguhan*: body-shaming as fuel for own body improvement and satisfaction.

The lived experiences of the participants regarding body-shaming fall under two (2) categories: forms of and responses to body-shaming. Under the forms of body-shaming, body-shaming is becoming normal in people's families, among their peers, and among their friends, particularly when they were younger and were more likely to laugh off the comments made about their appearance as harmless talk which results in them having a tendency to treat things lightly. When they were young, they viewed the negative comments as a joke and did not take them seriously. It is an idea of knowledge that relates to Filipino values, specifically humor, which is the ability to behave like a youngster, without taking things too seriously and while maintaining a positive outlook on life.

Moreover, the Filipino psychology concept of *pakikiramdam* involves the avoidance of negative comments, criticism, or directives that may potentially compromise or terminate a relationship. Engaging in direct criticism of individuals can be challenging, as it is essential to constantly work towards avoiding any possible offense. The individuals were verbally bullied like name-calling and pointing out about one's physical state where they received harsh comments about that from childhood to the present. There are several negative terms that fall under the body-shaming category, including diatribe, mockery, satire, jokes, and neglect (Sugiati, 2019). This is also related to the study of Abello (2019) whereas the current Filipino environment is both cruel and amusing towards "fat" and "tabachoy" folks. Aside from verbal bullying, one participant also experienced being physically bullied.

Under the responses to body-shaming, the participants also made comparisons between themselves and other people targeting their insecurities. Moreover, as a result of their experiences and interactions with others, their self-esteem decreased. A person's self-esteem can be evaluated by how much they appreciate and value themselves. According to Zulkifli et al.'s study from 2023, the victims may have reduced self-esteem. Body-shaming has a negative impact on an individual's mental

health, including reduced self-esteem (MindShift Psychological Services, 2021).

Additionally, the participants had a self-negative evaluation about how they see their own body. The participants have an ignorant response where they do not take notice of other people's comments about them. In addition, according to the study of Zulkifli et al.'s (2023), victims may avoid social interaction. Body-shaming can contribute to feelings of avoidance and isolation (MindShift Psychological Services, 2021). To distract themselves, participants divert their attention and do the things they like such as going to the gym that will help them cope with the situation that they have been experiencing. It also showed that focusing on other things helps people become aware of their own value. As the participants grow older, they come to the realization that the situation is no longer natural for them, and it should not have happened.

The participants' experiences about body-shaming motivated them to improve their appearance; and, as they go to the gym, the participants have a feeling of satisfaction because of their improvement. Further, the body-shaming experience contributed on doubting or questioning themselves about their self-image since sometimes, it is contrary to one's body image.

Given these findings, the researchers would like to recommend that the community take necessary and appropriate understanding toward recognizing their limitations when making comments, in addition to being more conscious and informed regarding how and when to joke or comment about the body, in order to reduce the body-shaming which might be experienced.

Psychology students and enthusiasts may conduct studies on male body-shaming in order to both reinforce and broaden the conceptions put together for male body-shaming which will give emphasis to the lived experiences of males who have been subjected to body-shaming.

While Filipino young adult men shall not only be aware of the problem but also recognize that it is never acceptable to normalize inflicted wrongdoing to them, which may prolong their negative experiences, especially when it comes to ignoring individuals who have made degrading remarks about their body.

Psychologists, counselors, psychiatrists, and other related professionals shall be aware of how they will offer help to every individual in understanding body-shaming, and how they will be able to recommend certain activities based on the findings. These may include, based on the results, playing, hanging out with friends, writing what they feel, and going to the gym. These may help individuals who experience body-shaming as a way of promoting the victim's health and well-being.

Lastly, future researchers may conduct a wider and more in-depth investigation on the lived experiences of Filipino young adult gym-going men with regards to body-shaming. Additionally, it is advised for them to present the same study in diverse contexts, geographical locations, and cultural contexts in order to broaden the understanding of the study. Additionally, it is advised that the future researchers interview more participants to saturate more the data. Future researchers are also suggested to find and access any additional concepts or frameworks that they think are lacking in some studies, since new theories, concepts, and other phenomena might develop over a period of time.

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