

## BODY SHAMING AS A MODERN FORM OF CYBER AGGRESSION

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This study complements the solutions of the research project KEGA No. 014UKF-4/2021 "(e-)Prevention against Cyber-Aggression Observed in Generation Z."

**Abstract:** The paper deals with body shaming, which is a form of bullying behavior. This is a modern phenomenon in the 21st century, in which the communicator makes disrespectful comments about the physical appearance of the person in question or uses various forms of (cyber)bullying. Body shaming accompanied by cyber aggression is becoming more and more a part of online communication and is as dangerous and distressing for the victim as cyberbullying. Therefore, it is necessary to focus on its elimination. The aim of the present paper is to define the basic principles of body shaming, reactions to it and risks as well as to point out its negative impact and the importance of prevention.

**Keywords:** body shaming, bigorexia, dysmorphobia, cyberspace, cyber aggression, cyberbullying.

### 1 Introduction

The process of digitization in the 21st century is present in various areas of our life. It affects our professional life and communication with others. Moreover, it is also transferred to our private sphere and leisure time. The fashion industry has also become indirectly enriched in cyberspace, and gradually began to increase the demands on fashion, lifestyle and regimen. Food has undoubtedly been a basic biological need since time immemorial. However, its perception is changing mainly due to the influence of the media and the image – "body image" they create about it. The influence of the media on judging beauty and so-called "body image" is very powerful especially for young people. The way of life of individuals is also determined by the subjective attitude towards food as well as by the possibilities between what a person really is and their perception of how they would like to be. It is also determined by the fetishization of the current beauty cult. Balancing between these options also determines the relationship to food itself. It concerns both the relationship to food intake and food restriction. It is the restriction of food that is closely related to "the effort to have a slim body" (Marchyn 2019, p. 171), which is currently very widespread.

Confrontation with food restriction has its origins in the ancient past. Deliberately denying oneself food and the resulting hunger was mainly associated with sacral traditions (Deans 2011), which continues to this day in traditional religious culture. Nowadays, due to the influence of the fashion industry, it is no longer about fasting but about deliberately denying the food in order to achieve the desired weight, which is promoted by the media as an ideal.

The implementation of body shaming is also related to culture. Similarly, to other countries, it is also completely natural to make comments on physical appearance in Slovakia. It is so much natural that judging the physical appearance is also reflected in cyberspace, especially on social networks.

The issue of body shaming is at the intersection of several scientific disciplines (Medicine, Psychology, Biology, Informatics, Marketing and Mass Media Communication). However, this topic also extends to Pedagogy, Media Education as well as Social Pathology.

We consider it necessary to draw attention to the fact that the issue of body shaming, similarly to other online threats, must be also addressed from a pedagogical point of view. If a child is a victim of any of the types of online risky behaviour, it affects the whole family and it also significantly determines their school success. Online risky behaviour is often associated with children

and adolescents but may not be exclusively carried out by minors. It can be carried out by children as well as on children. For these purposes, the following typology was processed:

*Table 1. Online risky behaviour carried out on children and by children*

Online risky behaviour	
Carried out on children	Carried out by children
sharenting	online shame
cybergrooming	cyber aggression
webcam trolling	cyberbullying
cybersex	sexting
luring	hateful behaviour
internet pornography	exclusion
romantic cheating	humiliation
cyber victimization	body shaming and its varieties
blackmailing	mockery
threat	online challenges
phishing	doxing
victim profiling	online addictions
clickjacking	risky use of social networks
electronic illegal trading	trolling
	spam

Each of the listed manifestations of online threats is specific to the process of implementation, intention, and risk. Concerning the risks of body shaming, it can seriously endanger and disturb the child/adolescent's psychosocial.

### 1.1 Theoretical definition of body shaming

The term "body shaming" was used for the first time by a journalist Philip Ellis (Farrell, 2011). In general, it can be observed that this term includes an assessment of the overall physical appearance, which can be of a positive or negative nature (Duarte et al. 2017). Negative assessment of physical appearance is accompanied by any demeaning comments about the victim's age, hair, food, clothing, or weight, or even by cruelty. It is a purposeful insensitive denigration of a particular person's physical appearance. The aim of body shaming is to point out victim's deficits, features and overall physical appearance in an inappropriate way.

Society dealt with body shaming already in the distant past as people naturally noticed each other. Nowadays, this term finds its place in the field of risky and online risky behaviour. Despite the above, the topic of body shaming is not yet sufficiently studied. As part of a brief historical overview, we can mention that the way of living and requirements for human beauty are directly related to society. In the past, within the cult of beauty ("body image" or "self-esteem"), larger proportions of the body were preferred. Such people were a sign that they lived at a good standard and did not lack the necessities of life, while thinner or emaciated people represented a poorer class that did not have access to food. In the middle of the 19th century, there was a shift from the worship of larger proportions to smaller shapes. It was during this period that the first diet books were published, and even then, diets and sculpted bodies in general were centred on women (Farrell 2011). It can be said that this trend continues to the present. However, more and more men are also starting to fall for this trend.

Negative assessment of physical appearance is usually accompanied by aggression, and therefore it often occurs in parallel with bullying or online risky behaviour (Wasch et al. 2016). If body shaming is carried out as part of bullying, it can also be considered as one of the types of risky behaviour, which is characterized by the fact that it is "the result of the interaction of several factors that increase the risk of failure in the social and psychological sphere" (Labáth 2001, p. 11). Body shaming transferred to cyberspace is a form of cyber aggression or cyberbullying, accompanied by humiliation, mockery, and

insults. Cyber aggression is more general, that is, it does not have to take on the character of cyberbullying. But if body shaming is carried out repeatedly and is accompanied by cyber aggressive behaviour, in that case, commenting on physical appearance can take on the character of cyberbullying. The following are the most common aspects of human body, based on which the aggressor carries out body shaming and about which he/she comments in a disrespectful way:

1. Weight – this is one of the most common reasons why people are ashamed of their bodies. Embarrassing comments can concern overweight (fat-shaming), thinner or emaciated people (skinny-shaming). Comments from others or comments below a photo on a social network embarrass and hurt them a lot.
2. Food - concerning this aspect, regimen, and the food a person likes are commented. Based on this aspect, a particular person is assessed comprehensively. The victim can be praised or shamed, which is also linked to fat-shaming or skinny-shaming. Food photos on social networks belong to a special category that users brag about and are a part of influencer marketing.
3. Attractiveness – commenting on external appearance (pretty-shaming). Body shaming in this context is accompanied by derogatory statements about the (un)attractiveness of the victim. In this approach, body shaming is combined with discrimination (lookism).
4. Clothing - this category is closely related to comments on weight. This is a very common phenomenon on social networks, which is associated with famous personalities, or with individuals who are not above-average well-off. In this case, the victims are attacked or ridiculed, e.g., for the lack of branded clothing, possession of valuable objects etc.
5. Age – discrimination or bullying of people because of their age (age-shaming/ageism). Age derogatory comments often take place in interaction with other components (e.g., hairstyle, make-up etc.), which increases the victim's hurt and shame.
6. Hair – commenting and insulting an individual for their hair or overall hairstyle (texture-shaming).
7. Body hair – these are inappropriate comments by Internet users on parts of the victim's body that, concerning their subjective opinion, should be shaved or not (Resnick 2022).

The attack on the above-mentioned aspects of the human body causes unpleasant feelings in the victim, thanks to which the attitude towards beauty or regimen changes. The female gender is most often discussed in connection with the growing trend of perfect bodies and requirements for physical appearance. It is important to note that men are not indifferent to their physical appearance either. While women struggle with body weight through weight loss, men are usually associated with the opposite process – bigorexia (Gattario et al. 2020), (Frederick et al. 2022).

## 2 Reactions to body shaming and their consequences

Reactions to body shaming or its consequences vary greatly and are related to the personality of the victim. It includes the fact of how a person perceives himself/herself, what his/her "self-esteem" is (self-assessment, perception of his / her individuality) and how a person can filter the negative evaluation of the environment. An individual in such circumstances can consider whether the bullying has some real basis and will work on himself / herself, e.g., lifestyle modification (balanced and adequate diet, balanced physical activity). It applies to both genders. It should be noted that it is very demanding, especially for adolescents (increased hormonal activity naturally leads to changes in physical appearance, but also in the emotions accompanying puberty).

Negative reactions to body shaming are inappropriate reactions, primarily in eating (Stice et al. 2011). Concerning girls, they can acquire a pathological nature in the form of anorexia – a medical condition accompanied by refusal of food and the addiction to losing weight, or bulimia – abnormal relationship to food and

overeating (Tran et al. 2020). These are eating disorders, which are often discussed by both the professional public and nonspecialists with the aim of education and pointing out the consequences of such behaviour concerning the physical and psychological state of the adolescent. Possible reactions to body shaming are less common in boys. However, we want to pay more attention to them. One of the reactions is "bodybuilding", which is approached as a positive reaction to shape one's body in a thoughtful, appropriate and healthy way. The negative reaction is bigorexia and dysmorphobia, which are associated with unhealthy exercise and abnormal anxiety about one's own ugliness.

Bodyshaming can lead to mental health problems. For example, depression but also anxiety, low self-esteem, feeling of hatred towards one's own body are very common (Ganson 2022). Concerning the victims of body shaming, the denigration of body itself can also cause eating disorders, which take place immediately after a repeated attack by the aggressor. Under the influence of stressful factors that are triggered by long-term humiliation and subsequent stress, an individual can:

1. regularly or suddenly stop eating and this can lead to anorexia,
2. overeat, which can lead to bulimia.

Based on international sources (Fairbun et al. 2003, Duarte et al. 2017, Nikbin et al. 2022, Resnick 2022), we provide our own interpretation of the consequences associated with body shaming:

1. psychological level - with long-term body shaming, feelings of helplessness, reduced self-confidence, anxiety, fear, shame towards one's own person or appearance may appear in the victim. These factors can result in hatred towards one's own body and this in turn can predict depressive states, intense long-term sadness, reduced motivation, loss of interests and the ability to experience joy as well as feelings of emptiness, hopelessness, emotional lability, feelings of guilt etc.,
2. physical level – repeated body shaming and repeated psychological failure can lead to eating disorders in an extreme case. These fundamentally affect the individual and are usually manifested in an inappropriate state of health, e.g., dizziness, stomachache, headache, hair loss and dry skin. In case of overeating, rapid more weight gain, blood pressure problems, heart problems and other health problems are very common health problems.

The victim's defense mechanism triggers either (cyber) aggressive behaviour towards the aggressor or life-threatening behaviour for the victim himself / herself, e.g., eating disorders, which are the most common problem. The existing relationship between risky behaviour, specifically the use of addictive substances, and hatred of one's own body or eating disorders has been empirically confirmed (Boswell, Lydecker 2021). Any derogatory comments on physical appearance are very intimate and hurtful, especially if the victim is subjected to indecent behaviour in cyberspace because they suddenly become the center of public humiliation. In such cases, it is possible to talk about digital trauma (Židová et al., 2021). Mental trauma caused by inappropriate behaviour towards the victim in cyberspace is accompanied by the same unpleasant feelings as bullying and cyberbullying (Kopecký et al., 2013). It follows that the victim of body shaming is comprehensively distressed (Laor 2022) and permanently stigmatized. The same is true for bigorexia and dysmorphobia, which appear to be even more dangerous because they overlap to a large extent with depression (Cororve, Gleaves 2001), which has an adverse effect on the victim's mental health (Liu, C., Liu, Z., & Yuan 2020).

### 2.1 Bigorexia and dysmorphobia as a reaction to body shaming

Individual body shaming reactions such as bigorexia and dysmorphobia are described in more detail in international and

professional psychological literature. Our purpose is to define them in more detail in the following part of the present paper.

If a male individual is subjected to body shaming and humiliated (e.g., because of a thin body), the victim is very likely to mobilize forces to prove his masculinity to the aggressor. The result of this procedure is a gradual weight gain. It is a defensive stance and, at the same time, a response to the reaction of the aggressor. The victim may gradually fall into bigorexia, which is the first reaction of body shaming. Bigorexia, also known as a psychological disorder or the Adonis complex, is a condition in which an individual becomes addicted to excessive and disproportionate exercise. Bigorexia can also be considered one of the types of risky behaviour because it also includes the use of anabolic steroids (Sobotková 2014). Since the individual gradually becomes dependent on physical activity and the substances, bigorexia was included among non-substance addictions in the list of mental health disorders. Concerning bigorexia, the individual is afflicted by obsessive thoughts and beliefs that their appearance is outrageous, and so they must change. Bigorexia begins with inconspicuous workout, which is favourable for a person under normal circumstances. But the dissatisfaction with one's own body drives the individual more and more towards abnormal invented defects (Janková, Runnová 2017).

In many cases, the physical activity can be supported by dysmorphobia, which is another reaction to body shaming as well as a variant of bigorexia. Dysmorphobia, also known as body dysmorphic disorder (Fairburn 2003), is a medical condition caused by a feeling of dissatisfaction with one's own body. An individual spends too much time caring about the imperfections of his / her appearance. Dysmorphobia is also characterized as an abnormal anxiety about the feeling of one's own ugliness (Munjack 1978). The perception of identity in an affected person is significantly defective. Dysmorphia can be very dangerous for the victim if the demands for care or a change in physical appearance are increasing. A person can worry about imperfections that are often invisible to others but complicate his / her life in many ways. Body shaming accompanied by (cyber) aggression arouses feelings of helplessness in the victim, the result of which is the inability to defend against (cyber)bullying. This is accompanied by self-image issues that are strengthened by the aggressor's hateful comments on or off social networks. Self-image is especially important for adolescents, who are the most at-risk group in this context.

Body shaming, including bigorexia, also leads to surgical modifications of the body and face, tattoos and piercings etc. (Sharp, Gerrard 2022). Surgical modifications are reinforced by bigorexia and dysmorphobia, which represent another reaction to body shaming. Social networks are also characterized by the performance of influencers who promote these modifications as "decorations" with which a person can beautify themselves. All this is especially dangerous for pubescents and adolescents who are not aware of the risks of such modifications.

### 3 Social media platforms and body shaming

Body shaming can be carried out in offline and online communication. Body shaming performed offline mostly represents face-to-face communication, the person is directly exposed to criticism or humiliation. It can also occur as part of bullying, which is strengthened by forms of bullying behaviour and therefore makes the victim even more vulnerable.

Body shaming present in online communication is carried out via the Internet, social networks, etc. The trends related to the appearance are subsequently sharpened especially on the platforms intended for this, e.g., in advertisements or in the sphere of influencer marketing, which is currently the most popular. Body shaming is closely related to influencerism, which is a special form of online threats. It is a modern phenomenon in which an influencer acts as an opinion maker and influences a

certain group of people in thinking, value experience, behaviour, and decision-making.

Body shaming acts in cyberspace with the most vulnerable material - photos. Since photos are also the most visible content on social networks (Židová 2021), we suppose that they exactly lead the aggressor to aggressive behaviour. It is also conditioned by the fact that body shaming cannot be carried out without the aggressor not knowing the victim visually, at least from the photo - her figure, general physical appearance, because this subjectively tells him whether the victim is attractive or not. Based on these qualities, he creates an image of the victim and then evaluates him/her.

One of the most popular and used social networks where body shaming is carried out is Instagram (Laor 2022). It is an application that offers its users several ways to inform others and make themselves visible. Users of social networks voluntarily get rid of their privacy (Kopecký et al., 2013) and thus enable aggressors to carry out body shaming to an even greater extent. Bodyshaming and the cult of beauty are strengthened by the presentation of a lifestyle, often supported by influencers. Exactly they promote the refined lifestyle as the ideal one in relation to human beauty. Most often, it is thinness, that has been promoted by the media for a long time and currently has nothing to do with an ascetic life. The physical side of individuals is also projected into the film industry, where e.g., negative persons are portrayed as stronger or vice versa. All this creates the impression, especially among the youth, that the presented opinions and attitudes towards this issue are correct.

### 4 Prevention of body shaming

Preventive measures related to body shaming can be divided into the following levels:

1. At the 1st level, it is about creating healthy „self image" and "self esteem". This process begins precisely in the family environment, since the family is the most important factor in the person's life, together with the choice of an appropriate educational style. Parents should know the child's developmental needs on a physical, mental, and emotional level, they should know how to raise the child, to consult a doctor if the child has a disproportionate weight and general physical appearance.
  - a. Parents should avoid comments but look for solutions. This aspect is also related to mental health and healthy lifestyle.
  - b. Parents should be a role model for the child in every area, including lifestyle.
  - c. Monitoring children's online activities is also essential. All this transfers to the secondary environment - the school.
2. On the 2nd level, the school is the secondary factor. The educational institutions follow up with the family or compensate for the shortcomings of family education.
  - a. The school systematically leads children to create the right values and role models.
  - b. Teachers sensitively monitor pupils' expressions and tackle any signs of bullying in the bud.
  - c. The school tries to eliminate or prevent inappropriate behaviour through classes designed for this purpose, or through talks, discussions, lectures, etc.
3. On the 3rd level there are various institutions and communities (psychological, medical, pedagogical...) that create preventive programs/projects. Although bodyshaming is currently less well-known and is rarely mentioned in professional circles as part of the theory of online threats. It must be appreciated that in Slovakia and other countries the attention is indirectly focused on programs associated with World Eating Disorders Day (e.g.: Spolu; Ecinstitut.cz, Inspirante.cz; The Emily Program; Homewood Health and others). The aim of the programs is to raise awareness of the most vulnerable area of mental health and to strengthen an intensive, controlled approach to take care of your body or lifestyle.

Because commenting on the physical body is a very sensitive and hurtful issue, our intention is to point out the importance of this phenomenon to act preventively in this area. One of such projects is the research task of KEGA: (e-)Prevention of cyber aggression in generation Z, where we are involved as co-researchers. The goal of the project is to create the educational strategies aimed at responsible behaviour in cyberspace, prevention and elimination of cyber aggression risks, strategies aimed at developing of the strong characters as a possible prevention of cyber aggression among Generation Z. In this context, the acronym "C.Y.B.E.R." represents the individual areas of the project focused on:

C – cognitization  
Y – self-image/self-esteem  
B – behaviour and socialization  
E – emotionalization  
R – resilience/resistance.

Considering the age, developmental and personality characteristics of children, the project is focused on: the development of character strengths, strengthening of life skills, development of cognitive abilities when working with digital means and the Internet, development of emotional and behavioral abilities, or proposals for practical solving of the individual forms of cyber-aggression through games and activities. As a part of the prevention of cyber aggression, it is very important to focus on the area of body shaming, which is real and very common in both offline and online communication. Under the project acronym "C.Y.B.E.R." bodyshaming can be included in the areas of C.Y.B., in which it is necessary to strive for prevention in the following context:

C - cognitization - the aim is to have a preventive effect on the development of children's critical thinking and lead them to distinguish the fact from fiction, which also includes distinguishing and selecting information in online communication. The field of cognitization in the context of body shaming prevention is also closely related to field Y - self-image/self-esteem - the aim is to help children form/shape their self-image, value themselves, realize their value and accept the fact that "I am the way I am" without difference in age, skin colour, weight, general physical appearance. This area leads to area B - behaviour and socialization - in this area it is necessary to make children aware that they are potentially at risk of any form of cyber aggression/cyberbullying on the Internet. Therefore, it is important to teach them to recognize manipulative techniques and false information in the cyber environment so that they are not influenced by the opinions of others to the extent that they lose their sense of worth. Unconditional acceptance of one's own person, (dis)satisfaction with "how I am" is also reflected in behaviour and actions, and it can significantly determine interpersonal relationships as well.

It is very important that preventive measures (focused on online threats) are also implemented in school, where the youth would be taught by teachers and lecturers that the value of a person does not lie in such adjustments and that not everything that is promoted on the Internet is for a person suitable/healthy. Children and young people are also at risk in cyberspace, where they can potentially often encounter with defamation of their physical appearance. They should know how to prevent bodyshaming, who is the right person to turn to in a delicate situation, or how to deal with criticism, humiliation, mockery.

## 5 Conclusion

The perception of one's own body or shame about one's physical appearance is associated with a whole range of psychopathologies, including eating disorders (Gilbert, 2002), (Duarte et al. 2017). This is a very current issue, which is increasingly related to younger and younger children. Diversity and otherness, which are becoming a natural part of ordinary schools and classes, underline the justification of this topic in pedagogy. In the practice of ordinary schools, it is therefore

necessary to deal more often with issues related to prevention and education, which leads to the acceptance of differences and tolerance of otherness. The school should thus support the desirable education in the family and supplement it appropriately. Therefore, the most vulnerable groups in cyberspace – children and youth, but also authorities – parents, teachers, psychologists, and other experts should be included in the issue of online risky behaviour (Kurincová et al. 2009).

We approached the issue of body shaming based on a study of international sources with the aim of pointing out the need for education and prevention. The aim of the present paper was to bring the issue of body shaming, including its negative consequences, to both the professional public and nonspecialists, as a part of authors' own contribution to the research of discussed topic, which has not yet received significant attention in Slovakia. We think that the issue in question will gain more importance due to the media pressure on physical appearance that young people are subjected to. We consider it necessary to start solving this modern phenomenon in Slovakia also from a research point of view. We believe that it would significantly enrich a pedagogical research, theory, and practice. For future research purposes, we raise the following open questions for the scientific field:

1. Is there a relationship between a cold emotional attachment of parents and a low self-assessment in a child?
2. Is there a relationship between ostracisation (body shaming) and the fact that a person is ashamed of his / her body?
3. Does the cyberspace functioning of a victim of body shaming differ from an individual who is not humiliated for physical appearance?

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