

# Body Shaming in Different Forms for Males and Females in Modern Urban Chinese Society

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## ABSTRACT

Body shaming has long been seen within society. It incorporates not only the outward appearance, but the overall image presented which includes temperament, clothing, cosmetics, and so on. Certain beauty standards, although especially rigid for females, can make both genders their victims. This paper aims at elaborating the nature of this act by comparing its manifestations towards males and females in modern urban Chinese society. A case study is used in this paper to illustrate respectively representative body shaming acts for two genders. For females, it has been seen that body shaming leads to self-objectification. Victims are accused of not being an adequate female if they failed to fit themselves into any beauty standard. For males, body shaming is closely related to masculinity and “Sissy shaming”, which is an act of discrimination towards males’ manifestations of femininity, is its main form. After analyzing and interpreting the cases, we come to conclude that the practice of body shaming is based on gender-stereotype which is for the benefit of patriarchy. As a result, body shaming towards whichever gender is a manifestation of hatred towards femininity, which can be concluded as misogyny.

**Keywords:** *body shaming, othering, female self-objectification, male homosexual social desire, Sissy shaming, misogyny, patriarchy, China*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Beauty standards are visible through entertainment, fashion, and beauty industries as well as in personal and corporate social media. These standards contribute to constructing singular, universal beauty ideals for females and males. Mass media serves as a breeding ground for social comparison including body image and appearance in the form of body shaming according to such standards [1].

Body shaming commonly refers to the act or practice of subjecting someone to criticism or mockery for supposed bodily faults or imperfections, according to Merriam-Webster [2]. Nowadays, with the fast development of mass media in Chinese society, acts of body shaming has been increasingly seen through means such as hate comments on social platforms or advertisements advocating unrealistic body figures, targeting not only females but also males. Previous research has shown that being exposed to social and cultural ideals for appearance leads to greater dissatisfaction with the body in general for both males and females [3]. In current Chinese society, body

shaming for females has its focus more on physical features of one’s body and it results from the beauty ideals that glorify fair skin, youthfulness and thinness, which has been largely influenced by other east Asian countries [4]. However, there is a lack of content on body shaming when the victims in question are males. Body shaming towards males in Chinese society has its form of expression mainly through “Sissy shaming”, which refers to the practice of mocking and discriminating all-female characteristics of males, including but not limited to physical features. Moreover, previous research did not cover the comparison of body shaming between two genders in Chinese society.

Attitudes towards masculine and feminine beauty have always been different throughout the centuries. Pascal Bruckner in his article *Désormais le sexe fort veut être beau* gives a simple summary on physical beauty for different genders [5]. He states that males do not necessarily need to have beautiful appearances. Money, intelligence or a good sense of humor can easily remedy the defect on appearances for males. As a matter of fact, socially speaking, physical beauty for males is a plus, a bonus. Physical defects, however, are

considered metaphysical for females. The sociocultural environment prioritizes females' physical and sexual attractiveness rather than other factors of their humanity [6]. That is why most research has been conducted regarding female body image. When it comes to male body image, a topic that attracts more and more attention, the research still lacks depth and breadth compared to its counterpart.

It is important to note here that talking about body shaming towards two genders, males and females, is due to the context of the patriarchal society which emphasizes the binary social gender. By studying how beauty ideals influence these two genders, we may be able to shed light on a solution to distinguish biological gender and social gender in order to break gender stereotypes. This paper will firstly clarify and redefine body shaming. Then, with the othering theory well concluded in Kyra roodt's thesis *(Re)constructing Body Shaming: Popular Media Representations of Female Identities as Discursive Identity Construction* as a reference, the paper aims at a case study in order to present that body shaming towards two genders has the same underlying logic, which is gender-role stereotype [1]. In the part of body shaming towards males in Chinese society, the paper elaborates how "Sissy shaming" that has its focus on appearances is the most common male body shaming.

## 2. BODY SHAMING

Body shaming is believed to appear in the individuals' misstep to meet the ideal body image and the acknowledgement of such failure [7]. It is an act that both males and females verbally or non-verbally behave in a manner where the effect may negatively impact the feelings of the self towards one's body. The so-called ideal body image illustrates beauty standards for not only body shape and size, but also the entire outward appearance. According to Englis et al., a beauty ideal incorporates both physical features and a variety of products, services and activities, which is an overall "look" that can be summed up in a sort of cultural shorthand. Clothing, cosmetics, hairstyling, leisure activities and plastic surgery are all included [8].

As a result, body shaming is not confined to the practice of humiliating solely physical imperfections, but the overall image of the individual according to the present beauty ideals, even the temperament presented should not be neglected. And since beauty ideals change from time to time, the urge to meet these standards always exists. Body shame as a negative emotion can be experienced by anyone.

According to Kyra Roodt, victims of body shaming are often branded as Others [1]. She says that when the identity of an individual is determined by what that individual perceives as 'other' or 'different to what I

am', the act of othering takes place [1]. Taking beauty commercials as an example, the targets will see the promotion of a certain body image that is considered to represent beauty, and then define themselves by what they do not have in common with this image, therefore become Others. Consequently, the act of body shaming is a process of seeking assimilation as well.

### 2.1 Body shaming for males in Chinese society

Even though there's a lack of research on males, males' bodily dissatisfaction or body shame is believed to have a close relationship with masculinity. As has been concluded by Eva Lind Fells Elíasdóttir, male who lacks masculinity is regarded as feminine and the desire for masculinity can be seen among males in all age groups. Up to 70% of male undergraduates report dissatisfaction with their bodies and 90% of them would like to be more muscular. When exposed to images of the ideal male body and even the ideal female body, males report negative body image [9].

As a result, males are commonly body shamed for their lack of masculinity. In current Chinese society, a certain "shame" towards males' appearances, "Sissy shaming", has been increasingly seen and studied. A male who manifests femininity in his appearance or behavior is defined as a "Sissy", with a sarcastic implication [10]. Consequently, "Sissy shaming" is a practice of discrimination for males' manifestations of femininity, and the practice which has its focus on males' outward appearances is clearly in the realm of body shaming.

In 2018, the debate about "Sissy shaming" has its first blast in China. This debate originated from the complaints of audiences towards the annual TV show *Welcome Back to School* streamed on China Central Television on September 1. The audience accused the male celebrities who appeared on the show of being so a "sissy" and worried it would cast a bad influence on children [11]. The criticism can be concluded as: The male celebrities lack masculinity having their faces with heavy make-up on and they look so delicate, even androgynous, that they become "sissies" [12].

According to criticism like this, having delicate faces and putting on make-ups are deemed to be feminine manifestations. Males who present themselves in this way, however handsome or muscular, become automatically "Sissies" and therefore deserve to be treated as Others for not being adequately males.

On another occasion later in 2019, one of these male celebrities in question, Zhu Zhengting, received criticism of a similar nature on a reality TV show called *Master in The House*. The show aired the criticism that was conveyed by a public figure, Cai Guoqing. According to Cai, it is unacceptable for boys to cover their mouth while laughing, because this gesture shows

a lack of masculinity, and it is even more unacceptable for a “beautiful” boy like Zhu to do it. After the show has been aired, there was criticism towards Cai by calling him a “Sissy” and referred to his criticism towards Zhu as “the pot calling a kettle black”. It can be seen that “Sissy shaming” is a common act of otherization towards males and is offensive enough because being feminine is unacceptable for males. This also proves the value of masculinity in society.

In September 2021, the National Radio and Television Administration (NRTA) of China has issued a notice about reinforcing the management of cultural and art programs and people involved. In this announcement, NRTA demands full rejection towards “Sissies” and defines the aesthetic appreciation towards “Sissies” as “abnormal” [13]. Therefore, the victimizer has evolved. As a national authority that represents the population joined the body shaming towards males.

## **2.2 Body shaming for females in Chinese society**

Beauty ideals for females in Modern urban Chinese society have already been studied with depth and width. Female body image in Chinese (social) media that is currently considered to represent female beauty can be concluded by the following core characteristics: fair skin, youthfulness and thinness. Other than that, features such as an oval face with a pointed chin, slim cheeks, high-bridged nose, big eyes are also depicted as desirable bodily representations in China [14]. Valeria Lotti concluded a wide variety of mandarin adjectives that define female beauty in modern Chinese society and found out that all of them are related to femininity [14]. Females who are not able to fit into these standards are not considered to be “feminine” enough, thus not adequately female. Moreover, during the endeavor to fit themselves into the standards, females live their body as seen by another, by an anonymous patriarchal Other [15]. The otherization is therefore established.

The “fair skin, youthfulness and thinness” beauty ideal is increasingly seen in advertisements and especially Chinese TV variety shows, which in turn reinforces this beauty ideal. In 2018, the first season of *Produce 101 China* attracted 5.4 billion views on Chinese video streaming website Tencent Video until October 2021 [16]. This reality television talent competition aims at selecting members for a future girl group (Rocket girls) basing around the formation of a K-pop girl group or boy group.

During the competition, girls are estimated by their competence at singing and dancing, and by their appearances. The final 11 winners were picked by online viewers. The winners are thus believed to represent female beauty according to the mainstream.

Ironically, one of the girls who made to the top 11 has received public body shaming afterwards. Guo Ying, whose stage name goes by Yamy, member of the Rocket Girls, was bullied in public during a company staff meeting. She released a recording online in which her boss shamed her appearance. She then wrote on social platform Weibo:

What am I? ... Since I’ve participated in *Produce 101*, I have always been labelled as “ugly” and “old”...My boss, whom I used to rely on and trusted the most, appealed to people from the staff meeting to humiliate me and described me as “too ugly to be put up with”...and made the listeners agree with him...I used to believe if there’s a problem then it must be my fault...the fear and inferiority made me lose myself in self-doubt [17].

This quote from Yamy illustrates perfectly the otherization and the victimizer’s attempt to obtain assimilation. In her case, the victimizers are the haters online, her boss, those who agreed with the boss in the staff meeting and those who didn’t point her boss wrong. By agreeing with the boss verbally or non-verbally, the assimilation is completed, and the victimizers will be dominant in the act of body shaming, thus exempt from being Others.

Self-objectification and internalized oppression suffered by victims of body shame will disable them from living out their true selves [1]. The experience will also lead to a variety of psychological consequences [18]. As can be seen in this case, Yamy, as a 29-year-old female idol who illustrates the fair skin, youthfulness and thin beauty ideal, can also be labelled as “ugly” and “old” and become self-doubted.

It shows that appearance ideals can be unrealistic for females. Yamy cannot grow younger and younger yet being old is unacceptable according to beauty standards. The rigidity towards females’ appearances is encouraging, directly and indirectly, all females to invest all their resources and energy, time and money, to create forevermore a feminized appearance in order to meet the criterion, in anticipation of this evaluative sexualized gaze [15]. And those who fail or refuse to do that will be considered ugly. Either way, they are not adequately females.

## **3. COMPARISON**

As we can see from above, body shaming is indeed a social act. This act of shaming towards males and females in Chinese society can be concluded as: in terms of appearance, males should look like males and females should look like females, otherwise, they will be body shamed. However, in this patriarchal society, who gives the criteria about what should males and

females look like? It is clear that body shaming in Chinese society is based upon gender-role stereotypes. Through the means of body shaming, we make sure that the social gender is congruent with the biological gender and then reinforce the differences between two binary genders, so as to reinforce the subordinate status of females to males in the society.

For males, body shaming has its focus mainly on the temperament presented or the exterior attachments such as clothes or make-up, rather than on the physical features of a body. Whether or not males' appearances or bodies are aesthetically pleasing, as long as they don't manifest femininity through appearance, they are not likely to receive body shaming from others in Chinese society. However, if they portray femininity in appearance, even having a muscular body won't be able to save them from body shaming. The origin of body shaming for males is femininity. Body shaming towards males, which is expressed in the form of "Sissy shaming", falls perfectly into "male homosexual social desire" raised by Chizuko Ueno. It is based on misogyny and sustained by homophobia [19]. It is important to note here that in Chinese society sexuality is not an open topic. Therefore, "Sissies" who are feminine in appearance, can be assumed to be potential homosexual males, and therefore become a threat, to endanger the subject status of heterosexual males in the patriarchal society. This gives rise to male homosexual social desire— here manifests through "Sissy shaming"— males build an alliance between males and discriminate against not only females but also men with feminine characteristics in order to get a sense of identity. To sum up, body shaming towards males is a misogynic behavior.

For females, on the other hand, body shaming focuses more on the physical features of body itself, which are relatively harder to alter. Appearance ideals for females are more rigid, prevalent and can even be unrealistic. The beauty standards fragment females into a collection of sexual parts— they should not only be fair, youthful and thin in appearance but also make sure that every bit of their body part meets the corresponding beauty standards. The beauty ideals are largely not under their control yet demand all their efforts. The origin of body shaming towards females is the sexual objectification of females. Needless to say, to treat females as "sexual objects" is a specific manifestation of misogynistic behavior [20]. Therefore, if we look at Yamy's case again, we can now understand that calling her "too ugly to be put up with" is implying that she is not yet qualified to be a sexual object under the male gaze and she is an Other until having some plastic surgery done in order to cater to the beauty standards made up to reinforce the subordinate status of females in the society. The fair skin, youthfulness and thinness beauty ideal also can be seen as an implication for females that they are encouraged to stay away from

outdoor activities to avoid sun exposure, to maintain innocence and to go on a diet. Because pale, simple-minded females with eating disorders can obviously well play the role of subordinates who are dependent on males with masculinity.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

This review article has discussed body shaming for males and females in modern urban Chinese society in order to understand the nature of this practice. We come to conclude that through the means of body shaming, females are encouraged to not embrace who they are and to be self-objected, while males are encouraged to develop a hatred for femininity. As a result, the act of body shaming is a misogynic behavior by definition and the more we practice body shaming, the more we reinforce the patriarchy in society.

For future research, it is worth studying body shaming for females and males in rural areas of China, which has been neglected from this review article due to different beauty standards and therefore different manifestations of body shaming. For example, in some parts of China, being chubby for females is still valued because it is believed to be a good body type for giving birth to children. This may help us get hold of the nature of body shaming in China with a more complete perspective. Another research path would be studying body shaming for males in Chinese society and compare it with other countries, such as other east Asian countries which have mutual influences with China due to cultural and geographical closeness. This research may lead to a greater comprehension of body shaming and beauty standards in China. Research also needs to be done about "Sissy shaming", which takes place in patriarchal societies worldwide.

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