"Just Jokes?": Body Shaming as a Form of Appearance-Based Bullying among University Students in Bangladesh

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ABSTRACT

Body shaming is a common form of appearance-based bullying among university students, and it is linked to psychological distress and lower academic engagement. Yet few qualitative studies have examined it in South Asian universities, particularly in Bangladesh. This interpretive study explored how Bangladeshi university students experience body shaming, come to see it as normal, and cope with it. Sixteen undergraduate students at a private university in Rajshahi, recruited through snowball sampling, took part in in-depth interviews, which were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis. Three themes were developed: (1) normalizing appearance-based comments in everyday life, in which remarks framed as jokes or care discouraged students from naming them as bullying; (2) gendered, skin-tone, and identity-based body shaming; and (3) psychological distress, academic disruption, and coping with limited institutional recognition. Remarks came from peers, teachers, family members, and social media, and some students fell silent in class or stopped attending. Support came mainly from friends, and no participant described a way to report body shaming to the university. Universities should treat body shaming as bullying even when it is framed as a joke. Their response should include culturally informed policies, teacher training, visible counseling services, and rules that cover social media.

Keywords: Body shaming; Appearance-based bullying; Normalization of bullying; University students; Bangladesh

INTRODUCTION

Bullying is widely recognized as a public health concern because of its effects on young people's mental health and well-being (Arslan et al., 2021; Han et al., 2025; Ye et al., 2023). It is usually seen as a school problem, but it also occurs in higher education (Tight, 2023). University students remain vulnerable to peer aggression (Cowie & Myers, 2015), which has been linked to social anxiety in learning situations (Pörhölä et al., 2019) and poorer mental health (Ali & Shahbuddin, 2022). Appearance-based bullying, however, remains comparatively underexplored among university students.

Defining Appearance-Based Bullying and Body Shaming

Appearance-based bullying is bullying directed at a person's physical traits, such as body weight, body shape, skin tone, height, or facial features. Body shaming is closely related: Schlüter et al. (2023) defined it as unsolicited, mostly negative comments about another person's body, ranging from well-meant advice to malicious insults, and noted that it can become cyberbullying when repeated. Such comments are often presented as jokes, advice, or concern, so they are easily dismissed. Social media extends them beyond face-to-face settings; in a Swedish study, adolescents described appearance-related cyberbullying as common, especially for girls (Berne et al., 2014).

Gendered Dimensions of Body Shaming

Body shaming is also gendered. In one Italian study, girls reported weight-related body shaming about twice as often as boys (Cerolini et al., 2024), and in appearance-related cyberbullying, girls often received comments about being fat, while boys were commonly said to look or seem "gay" (Berne et al., 2014). Lighter skin carries social value, particularly for women (Hunter, 2007). Men face different ideals, such as being fit and muscular, but the appearance norms women meet in daily life are more rigid and pervasive (Buote et al., 2011). Experiences also vary with individual differences and intersecting identities (Waite et al., 2024).

Psychological, Social, and Academic Consequences of Body Shaming

The consequences go beyond embarrassment. Teasing, bullying, and body shaming have been linked to body image disturbance, depression, and disordered eating (Cerolini et al., 2024; Day et al., 2022; Marco et al., 2018), to psychological distress among people with skin conditions (Magin et al., 2008), and to lower body esteem (Fowler et al., 2021). In severe cases, body dissatisfaction and body shaming have been linked to self-harm and suicide attempts (Rizk-Hildbrand et al., 2025). Among university students, body image dissatisfaction has also been linked to cyberbullying perpetration, partly through depression (Balta et al., 2020).

Global Evidence on Body Shaming

Research on appearance-related teasing and bullying has expanded over the past decade, but much of it comes from Western and other high-income countries; in one systematic review, only 4 of 64 data sets came from Asia (Day et al., 2022). In a study of 413 adolescent girls, cybervictimization was linked to greater body image disturbance (Prince et al., 2025); about one in four Czech adolescents reported online body shaming (Novotný et al., 2025); and among 636 university students in Nigeria, body shaming was significantly associated with academic behavior (Opesemowo & Taiwo, 2026). In higher education, interviews and focus groups with 17 students at a UK university showed that appearance had a large impact on university life (Waite et al., 2024), and Kling and Feragen (2024) explored everyday conversations about appearance among young people with a visible difference.

Body Shaming in the Bangladeshi Context

Evidence from Bangladesh is limited, especially in higher education. Studies of school students have documented high levels of bullying alongside serious psychological and behavioral consequences (Ahmed et al., 2021; Rahman et al., 2020), and national survey data show a strong association between cyberbullying and major depressive disorder among female adolescents (Noor et al., 2025). Among 7,011 university students, bullying, mostly verbal, was common and significantly associated with anxiety, depression, and poorer academic performance (Rafi et al., 2026). Patriarchal norms shape the online abuse of women (Islam, 2024; Klose & Jebin, 2024), women in one interview study described body shaming as normalized and dismissed as "fun" (Klose & Jebin, 2024), and female university students report hate speech, much of it based on gender, appearance, and skin color, both online and offline (Ankita & Atikuzzaman, 2026).

Research Gap and Study Contribution

Existing studies have mostly documented the prevalence, risk factors, and psychological consequences of body shaming and bullying; little qualitative research has examined how body shaming is experienced, interpreted, and normalized in everyday university life, particularly in Bangladesh. This study addresses that gap by exploring students' lived experiences of body shaming, its normalization, and its gendered forms in an underrepresented South Asian setting.

Theoretical Framing

This study draws on Olweus's (1993, 2013) definition of bullying and Goffman's (1963) theory of stigma. Olweus defined bullying as intentional negative actions, repeated over time, against a person who has difficulty defending themselves, within an imbalance of power. Although developed in schools, the concept has also been

applied to university students (Cowie & Myers, 2015; Tight, 2023). Repetition and power imbalance help distinguish sustained appearance-based ridicule from isolated teasing. Intent is harder to apply: presenting harmful acts as harmless, for example as jokes, is a recognized mechanism of moral disengagement in bullying (Thornberg & Jungert, 2014), and remarks framed as humor or concern leave their intent ambiguous even when their effects are harmful. Following Volk et al. (2014), who proposed replacing intent with goal-directed behavior that harms another person within a power imbalance, this study treats intent as contested and examines how humor or care frames obscure harm.

Olweus's criteria describe when appearance-based remarks become bullying, but not why some students become recurring targets. Goffman's (1963) theory of stigma addresses this question: a stigma is an attribute that discredits a person in the eyes of others. Body size, skin tone, and gender nonconformity are examined here as attributes that can be stigmatized, marking students as different and inviting repeated scrutiny. Goffman also described how stigmatized people manage the way others see them, for example by concealing the discrediting attribute.

METHODS

Study Design and setting

This qualitative interpretive study used reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2022) to explore how university students experience, interpret, and respond to body shaming. The study was conducted at a private university in Rajshahi, Bangladesh, whose students come from urban, semi-urban, and rural areas and a range of socioeconomic backgrounds. Most commute, so much of their social life takes place in shared spaces such as classrooms, corridors, and the cafeteria. The university was chosen because the authors had access to it and could build the rapport a sensitive topic needs; it is not presented as representative of Bangladeshi universities.

Participants and Recruitment

Sixteen undergraduates took part: eight women, seven men, and one hijra (third-gender) student, aged 21 to 25 years (M = 22.4; Table 1). They were recruited through snowball sampling, in which early participants referred others who had experienced or witnessed appearance-related comments on campus (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981); personal referral helped reach students who might otherwise have held back. Referral chains stayed largely within participants' social and academic circles. Participants were in their third to sixth semesters, in social science, arts, and humanities programs, and recruitment ended when referrals produced no further participants.

Table 1 Participant Characteristics

Participant	Gender	Age (years)
IDI 1	Female	22
IDI 2	Male	21
IDI 3	Female	23
IDI 4	Male	21
IDI 5	Male	22
IDI 6	Female	24
IDI 7	Male	21
IDI 8	Female	22
IDI 9	Female	21
IDI 10	Female	25
IDI 11	Male	23
IDI 12	Male	24
IDI 13	Female	22
IDI 14	Female	23
IDI 15	Male	22
IDI 16	Hijra	23

Note. IDI = in-depth interview.

Consistent with reflexive thematic analysis, saturation was not used to determine sample size (Braun & Clarke, 2021b). Instead, the sample was judged to provide sufficient information power (Malterud et al., 2016): the aim was focused, all participants had direct or close experience of appearance-based comments, the interviews were in-depth, and the analysis drew on established theory.

Data Collection

Both authors conducted semi-structured, in-depth interviews between 20 June and 9 August 2025. The guide covered experiences of body shaming, where it occurred, perceived causes, emotional and academic consequences, and coping, with follow-up prompts as needed. Interviews took place face to face in locations participants chose, including campus spaces and their residences, were conducted in Bengali with occasional English, and lasted 45 to 65 minutes. They were audio-recorded with consent, transcribed verbatim in Bengali, and translated into English by the authors.

Data Analysis

Analysis followed the six phases of reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2022) and was conducted manually. The authors read the transcripts repeatedly, coded segments on appearance comments, peer and family interactions, emotional responses, and academic effects, and grouped the codes into candidate themes, which were reviewed against the data set and then defined and named. Both authors coded independently and discussed differing readings to reach a shared interpretation, aiming for a richer reading rather than coding reliability (Braun & Clarke, 2021a). Coding was mainly inductive, with the bullying and stigma frameworks drawn on when themes were reviewed and interpreted.

Ethical Considerations

The university's Ethical Review Committee approved the study on 28 May 2025, before data collection began. The approval reference number is not reported, to preserve the anonymity of the study site. Participants received an information sheet, gave written informed consent, and were told they could withdraw at any time. Participation was voluntary, no incentives were offered, and data were stored securely and accessible only to the authors.

Results

Theme 1: Normalizing Appearance-Based Comments in Everyday Life

Participants described appearance-based remarks as routine at university, at home, and online. Because the remarks came as jokes, advice, or casual talk, participants rarely named them as bullying at first and often responded with silence, politeness, or by ignoring them. Over time, repetition led several to recognize them as body shaming.

Subtheme 1.1: Jokes and Teasing as Cover for Repeated Mockery

Most participants described remarks delivered as jokes or teasing, which made them hard to challenge. One account shows how this framing worked and how repetition broke it down:

"…some of my classmates said things like, 'He looks like he's gained a lot of weight,' while others laughed and said, 'You should really stop eating so much.' I thought these comments were just jokes at first. But as comments about my weight became more common and repetitive, I started to see them as body shaming instead of harmless jokes." (Male, IDI 12)

Male participants described teasing as an accepted part of peer culture: "A lot of people think it's just harmless teasing, especially boys" (Male, IDI 5). Yet the joking frame did not make the remarks harmless:

"Such remarks usually sound like good-natured teasing, yet they always cut me emotionally." (Male, IDI 4)

Female participants described the same pattern. One recalled her first day at university:

"…as soon as I walked into the classroom, some of my classmates said, 'Here comes the sick queen,' and others laughed. I stood there quietly because I was scared and embarrassed." (Female, IDI 10)

Onlookers' laughter turned the remark into a group event that she had to absorb in silence. As she put it, "in university culture, this kind of behavior is often seen as funny" (Female, IDI 10).

Subtheme 1.2: Family Comments Framed as Care or Advice

Seven participants described comments from relatives, which came as advice, concern, or casual observation rather than open mockery and were harder to reject. One described remark about his height and thinness:

"Such words may be spoken by family members as 'ar ektu lomba hole bhalo hoto' [it would have been better had you been taller] or 'tui eto shukna ken?' [why are you so thin?]. I believe that such remarks are hurtful, although they may not be meant to hurt." (Male, IDI 4)

Because the remarks came from close friends or relatives who might not intend to insult him, he stayed calm and polite rather than object (Male, IDI 4). For women, family comments focused on body shape and its visibility to others:

"These comments were often framed as casual observations or advice, such as suggesting that I dress 'carefully' or implying that my body attracted unnecessary attention. Although presented as a concern, I felt these remarks placed undue responsibility on me to manage others' perceptions of my body." (Female, IDI 14)

Repeated over years, such comments carried a cumulative message:

"Gradually, I began to feel that these constant things conveyed a very distinct message: my body is not completely mine, but is always under others' watch and always judged by them." (Female, IDI 13)

Subtheme 1.3: Online Spaces and the Normalization of Shaming

Body shaming continued online, where the audience widened from friends to strangers:

"Things got worse after I posted some pictures on Instagram. Friends made fun of me, but strangers and acquaintances used sarcastic emojis to mock my body. I tried to ignore these responses, but over time, I began to absorb the negativity." (Male, IDI 2)

Women described remarks moving into group chats and online conversations (Female, IDI 6; Female, IDI 13), and another explained how constant exposure made the practice seem ordinary:

"Social media does play a part. We think body shaming on social media is normal because we've gotten used to it." (Female, IDI 8)

Theme 2: Gendered, Skin-Tone, and Identity-Based Body Shaming

Which features were targeted, and what the remarks implied, differed between women, men, and the hijra participant.

Subtheme 2.1: Gendered Scrutiny of Bodies and Clothing

One woman summarized the different standards for women's and men's bodies:

"For women, the most common thing to talk about is breast size, and for men, it's height. People say things like, 'Ai boyos aw tumi onek short!' [Even at this age, you're so short!] or '5 feet o na!' [Not even five feet!]. Body shaming is different for men and women." (Female, IDI 8)

Women described scrutiny of body shape and proportions (Female, IDI 6; Female, IDI 13; Female, IDI 14) and of weight or thinness (Female, IDI 1; Female, IDI 3; Female, IDI 8; Female, IDI 10). Comments on shape were often linked to femininity, decency, and marriageability and extended to clothing, and modest clothing did not end them:

"When I entered university, I realized that the stressors were now of a more indirect nature, i.e., remarks in group chats, casual talks with peers, or remarks that a particular outfit does not fit my body type, and so on, which often made me dress in a simple and fitting manner even when my clothing decisions were quite modest and decent." (Female, IDI 6)

Men described being judged on height (Male, IDI 4; Male, IDI 5; Male, IDI 15), strength and build (Male, IDI 2), weight (Male, IDI 7; Male, IDI 12), and skin tone (see Subtheme 2.2), against an ideal of a tall, strong, "manly" body (Male, IDI 2; Male, IDI 4). One recalled:

"People made fun of me a lot in my first year because I had a 'thin and weak' body. Some friends made fun of my narrow shoulders or my inability to lift heavy things." (Male, IDI 2)

He added that men avoided talking about the pain for fear of being called "weak" or "overly sensitive" (Male, IDI 2), so the norms that set the standard also kept them from naming the harm.

Subtheme 2.2: Colorism and Skin Tone

Three men described being targeted for dark skin (Male, IDI 4; Male, IDI 11; Male, IDI 15). One heard remarks such as "tui ektu dark, photo te bhalo asis na" [you are a bit dark, you are unattractive in pictures] (Male, IDI 4), and peers called another "kalu" and "giant negro" (Male, IDI 15). A third described remarks from classmates and a teacher:

"When I walked into the classroom, some of my classmates would call me 'carbon,' 'blackboard,' or ask, 'Why are you so dark?' Some people even joked that they couldn't see me in the dark. I remember a time when a teacher jokingly called me a 'dark handsome boy' during a presentation, which made the whole class laugh. This moment was very embarrassing and emotionally painful for me." (Male, IDI 11)

The teacher's remark carried the authority of the classroom and was made in front of everyone. The participant linked these experiences to a social preference for fair skin that he had recognized since childhood and found unchanged at university (Male, IDI 11). Two women described fair skin as part of the ideal for women (Female, IDI 1; Female, IDI 3), but no woman described being targeted for her own skin tone.

Subtheme 2.3: Harassment of a Hijra Student

The hijra participant described body shaming that could not be separated from his gender identity. Because his appearance and behavior differed from his peers', he described being refused academic help, excluded from programs, avoided, and rejected on sight (Hijra, IDI 16). When he shared videos or photos of himself dancing on social media, the comments turned to his body, his desirability, and his identity:

"Many people message me privately, asking, 'Are you very lonely? Do you need someone? If you want, I can take away your loneliness. Who do you like, a boy or a girl? Oh, I see, you don't even know who you need.'" (Hijra, IDI 16)

The messages combined sexual solicitation with mockery of his identity, out of others' sight. He rejected the idea that his body was at fault:

"My physical appearance is natural. So why do they treat me differently? That's not right." (Hijra, IDI 16)

Theme 3: Psychological Distress, Academic Disruption, and Coping with Limited Institutional Recognition

The effects lasted well beyond the remarks: emotional distress, withdrawal from social and academic life, and, for some, disrupted studies. Most participants coped alone or with friends' help. Counseling helped those who reached it, but no participant described a way to report body shaming.

Subtheme 3.1: Emotional Distress and Self-Doubt

Participants described hurt, shame, anxiety, and lasting self-doubt. One explained the effect of remarks about her weight:

"These comments really hurt me. They made me feel insulted, discouraged, and mentally ill." (Female, IDI 3)

Anxiety followed others into everyday settings: one felt anxious walking, sitting, or interacting in mixed-gender settings (Female, IDI 14), and another linked the comments to a constant sense of being watched:

"This kind of bullying had a big effect on my mental health because I always thought that everyone was judging me based on how I looked." (Female, IDI 10)

Subtheme 3.2: Withdrawal and Academic Disruption

Many participants withdrew from situations that put their bodies on view. Six avoided photographs (Male, IDI 2; Male, IDI 4; Male, IDI 5; Female, IDI 6; Male, IDI 11; Female, IDI 13), and others pulled back from friends and social life (Female, IDI 1; Female, IDI 3; Female, IDI 10; Male, IDI 11; Male, IDI 12; Hijra, IDI 16). One described where this led:

"I eventually became isolated while I was at university. The environment was not bearable." (Female, IDI 8)

Withdrawal also reached the classroom. Participants avoided group discussions, presentations, and public speaking (Male, IDI 5; Female, IDI 10; Male, IDI 11; Male, IDI 12), one described frequent absence from class (Female, IDI 10), and another explained how his silence was misread:

"I didn't want to speak in front of others, didn't want to join class discussions, and eventually stopped hanging out with others. My academic performance suffered because my silence during group work led teachers to think I was less interested or less capable." (Male, IDI 12)

For two participants, body shaming threatened their continued study. One of them described how an incident escalated:

"It is a matter of fact that once in a varsity program, one of my friends called me 'negro,' and there was a fight between the two of us. After that brawl, I quit class and dropped a semester." (Male, IDI 15)

Subtheme 3.3: Coping with Limited Institutional Recognition

Most participants coped alone: by ignoring remarks (Male, IDI 2; Female, IDI 3), changing how they looked or dressed (Female, IDI 1; Male, IDI 2; Female, IDI 6; Female, IDI 13; Female, IDI 14), avoiding those who made them (Male, IDI 5), or rebuilding their confidence (Female, IDI 3; Female, IDI 8).

Friends were the support mentioned most often (Male, IDI 5; Male, IDI 7; Female, IDI 10; Male, IDI 11; Male, IDI 12), and for the three participants who used university counseling, a close friend was the route to it (Female, IDI 10; Male, IDI 11; Male, IDI 12):

"A close friend told me, 'Your skin color does not define you; your talent will define you.' This was a turning point for me. I got help through university counseling sessions, where I learned that a person's skin color does not determine their worth." (Male, IDI 11)

No participant described reporting an incident to the university, and one explained why:

"But there is no official way for people to report body shaming or get help from institutions, which often means that victims have to stay quiet or deal with it on their own." (Female, IDI 9)

Several participants called for awareness programs, counseling, and rules against appearance-based comments (Female, IDI 1; Male, IDI 2; Female, IDI 3; Male, IDI 4; Male, IDI 5; Female, IDI 9).

DISCUSSION

This study examined how university students in Bangladesh experience, interpret, and respond to body shaming. Appearance-based remarks were normalized through humor, care, and online visibility. The targets of these remarks differed by gender, skin tone, and gender identity. Their consequences reached into students' emotional, social, and academic lives, and support came mainly from friends rather than the university.

When Body Shaming Becomes Bullying

Two of Olweus's (1993, 2013) criteria for bullying were clearly present. The remarks were repeated, often over years, and several were made before an audience whose laughter left the person targeted silent; in one case, the remark came from a teacher. Intent was harder to judge, because remarks came as jokes or concern and some participants believed they "may not be meant to hurt" (Male, IDI 4). Schlüter et al. (2023) defined body shaming as an unrepeated act that does not necessarily intend harm and can become cyberbullying when repeated. Participants, however, described repeated remarks within unequal relationships, in which body shaming took the form of bullying even where intent remained unclear. Volk et al.'s (2014) goal-directed definition offers a way to recognize such remarks as bullying without proof of malicious intent.

The joking and caring frames worked as moral disengagement, recasting harmful remarks as harmless (Thornberg & Jungert, 2014), and participants' silence or politeness allowed the remarks to continue. Repetition also worked the other way: the accumulation of remarks led some participants to stop seeing them as jokes (Male, IDI 12), although that recognition came late and each reached it alone.

Family remarks do not fit Olweus's (1993) peer-focused definition, but they voiced the same norms, came framed as concern, and were harder to refuse; meeting the same judgments at home since adolescence may help explain why peer remarks seemed ordinary. Online spaces widened the audience and, in one participant's words, made shaming seem "normal because we've gotten used to it" (Female, IDI 8), consistent with research on appearance-related cyberbullying (Berne et al., 2014) and online body shaming (Novotný et al., 2025).

Stigma and Gendered Scrutiny

Goffman's (1963) concept of stigma helps explain which bodies attracted remarks: weight, thinness, height, dark skin, and gender nonconformity marked students as departing from prevailing norms. Participants' responses resembled stigma management, such as dressing to conceal the body, avoiding photographs, and withdrawing from settings where the body was on view, which reduced exposure but narrowed their social and academic participation.

These norms were gendered. Women were judged on body shape and clothing, often in terms of femininity, decency, and marriageability, while men were judged on height, strength, and skin tone, consistent with research on gendered appearance ideals (Buote et al., 2011) and gendered online abuse in Bangladesh (Islam, 2024; Klose & Jebin, 2024). Objectification theory (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997) helps interpret women's accounts: feeling "always under others' watch" (Female, IDI 13) and anxious in mixed-gender settings reflects the self-monitoring

the theory links to being treated as a body to be looked at. For men, masculine norms set the standard and discouraged disclosure, because admitting hurt risked seeming "weak" (Male, IDI 2).

Colorism followed an unexpected pattern. Research has linked lighter skin to status and beauty, particularly for women (Hunter, 2007), and female university students in Bangladesh report hate speech based on skin color (Ankita & Atikuzzaman, 2026). Here, however, all participants targeted for skin tone were men, although two women described fair skin as part of the female ideal, and in one case the remark came from a teacher. With 16 participants this pattern cannot be generalized, but it suggests that colorism in universities is not a concern for women alone.

The hijra participant's account extends appearance-based bullying beyond the gender binary: his appearance, behavior, and identity were targeted together, through exclusion on campus and sexualized private messages online, consistent with research on the social exclusion of hijra people in Bangladesh (Khan et al., 2009). One account cannot represent gender-diverse students, but it shows that prevention built around two genders will miss harms that gender-diverse students face.

Consequences and the Limits of Institutional Response

These consequences are consistent with research linking bullying among Bangladeshi university students to anxiety, depression, and poorer academic performance (Rafi et al., 2026), and body shaming to academic behavior (Opesemowo & Taiwo, 2026). Effects could also be misread: one participant's silence in group work was taken by teachers as a lack of interest or ability (Male, IDI 12).

Support came mainly from friends, who led three participants to counseling that helped them. No participant described reporting an incident, and one said no official route existed. Waite et al. (2024) identified ways UK universities could promote appearance inclusivity, but participants here described nothing comparable and did not see body shaming as something their university recognized or addressed.

Limitations

This study has several limitations. It was conducted at one private university in northern Bangladesh, so its findings may not transfer to public universities or other regions. All participants studied the social sciences, arts, or humanities. Snowball sampling drew on shared social circles, and students with strong experiences of body shaming may have been more willing to take part. Some participants were students of one of the authors, which may have influenced what they shared. The authors translated the interviews without an independent check, so some nuances may have been lost, and with only one gender-diverse participant the study cannot speak for gender-diverse students more broadly. Future research should include several public and private universities. It should also hear from students who make appearance-based remarks, as well as bystanders and teachers. Studies are also needed on colorism among men, on the experiences of gender-diverse students, and on interventions against appearance-based bullying, both offline and online.

Policy Implications

Body shaming in this study came from peers, teachers, family, and online spaces, so responses are needed at several levels (Espelage, 2014). Universities should name body shaming, including remarks framed as jokes, in their anti-bullying policies and codes of conduct. These policies should cover body size, skin tone, and gender identity and explicitly protect gender-diverse students, including hijra students. Universities should also offer a confidential reporting route that explains what follows a report. Teachers need training to recognize and avoid appearance-based remarks and to see that a student's silence in class may signal distress. Since friends were the main source of support, awareness programs could help students challenge "just jokes" and refer friends to counseling. Counseling services should be more visible, prepared for appearance-related distress, and have clear procedures for students who disclose suicidal thoughts. Codes of conduct should also cover social media, and students need guidance on reporting, blocking, and documenting online harassment.

CONCLUSION

For the students in this study, body shaming was rarely an isolated joke. Repeated within unequal relationships and presented as humor or care, it functioned as appearance-based bullying that students struggled to name and largely managed alone. Its targets were shaped by gender, skin tone, and gender identity, and its effects reached students' mental health, social lives, and studies. Universities should recognize body shaming as bullying, give students a way to report it, and prepare teachers, counselors, and students to respond.

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