



Challenging the Societal Stigma Surrounding Body Dysmorphia in the Philippines: Bridging the Gap of Misconceptions

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ABSTRACT: Body Dysmorphic Disorder is a mental health disorder that adversely affects how people perceive their physique and self-concept. The study focuses on a thorough investigation of the pervasive societal stigma surrounding Body Dysmorphic Disorder (BDD) in the Philippines. Moreover, it expounds on the related literature and studies to elucidate the profound impact of the stigma on individuals with the disorder. Patients with the disorder often experience unrestrained and excessive repetitive behavior, such as criticizing one's physical flaws, people-pleasing, and overly obsessing about self-grooming practices (Body Dysmorphic Disorder, n.d.). Utilizing the integrative review for the methodology, the paper examines relevant and significant literature from electronic databases to further develop vital information and analyses for challenging social stigmas related to body dysmorphia in the Philippines. The study reviews the existing literature to recognize social perceptions and stereotypes of body dysmorphia in the Philippines, exploring cultural, social, and historical elements that contribute to the stigma. It identifies interventions intended to challenge societal stigma. Local and international sources were used to examine the effectiveness of existing approaches in addressing BDD and its societal stigma. It further explores the effectiveness of community-based education programs, media literacy campaigns, and mental health awareness programs in challenging misconceptions and promoting acceptance of people facing BDD. The research aims to identify the societal stigma associated with BDD or Body Dysmorphic Disorder in the Philippines, which negatively affects the mental and emotional well-being of individuals facing the disorder, further bridging the gap of misconceptions.

KEYWORDS: Body Dysmorphia, Body Dysmorphic Disorder, Misconceptions, Philippines, Societal Stigma

INTRODUCTION

In the broad domain of mental health discussion, there are numerous kinds of disorders. Some of these disorders are widely known and experienced in today's world. Meanwhile, some conditions may still be quite unfamiliar to most people. Nevertheless, certainly, there is always a stigma associated with any mental health issues. Body dysmorphic disorder is one of the mental health disorders that is usually overlooked yet really concerning. As specified by an article published by the Cleveland Clinic entitled "Body Dysmorphic Disorder," this is a condition that negatively affects how you perceive your own body and self-image. Individuals with this disorder usually indulge in a damaging pattern of continuously stressing themselves with minor flaws in their physical appearance. It was stated in an article published by the Body Dysmorphic Disorder Foundation that body dysmorphia can result in severe emotional distress, including anxiety and depression. Additionally, it can also cause feelings of shame and disgust to arise. Moreover, Granet (2022) also stated that the most disturbing impact of body dysmorphic disorder is the 25% suicide attempt rate among those with this condition.

Unfortunately, many misconceptions attached to body dysmorphic disorder are rampant nowadays. This stigma is usually the outcome of people's lack of awareness of this disorder, causing them to invalidate people battling with body dysmorphia. Individuals with this disorder often experience being rejected, mocked, stigmatized, or judged as vain when expressing concerns about their looks (Dietel & Buhlmann, 2020). The misconceptions and stigma surrounding this disorder may worsen the condition of those with body dysmorphia, as this will make them feel ashamed of seeking help. This stigmatization of society toward mental health disorders such as body dysmorphic disorder can be disturbing. Thus, this topic needs to be discussed and addressed.



People with body dysmorphia are often ostracized in society. They frequently feel discouraged from seeking help and treatment because of the fear of being judged. With that being said, this study will conduct a thorough evaluation of the stigma that is attached to body dysmorphic disorder (BDD) impacts those individuals suffering from this condition. Its objective is also to determine different societal factors affecting body dysmorphia. This study will greatly benefit everyone in society as its objective is to provide a thorough overview of the subject matter. This study will help individuals be more informed and educated to reduce societal stigma. Hence promoting a more supportive society for those who are grappling with this mental health disorder.

One of the primary symptoms most individuals correlate with Body Dysmorphia is inadequacy of the individual's perceived body image (BI). According to the DSM-TR, BDD is proposed to be within the spectrum of Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD) as both psychological disorders present similar behavioral tendencies of compulsion and obsession with a particular thought. In distinction, individuals who suffer from BDD are preoccupied with the idea of a physical deformity or defect they observe in the individual's complexion (Philips et al., 2007). Patients who suffer from BDD manifest repeated habits of excessive behavior, such as dissecting and criticizing flaws in the way they look, and more often resort to unhealthy habits of getting excessive cosmetic surgeries or alterations to "fix" their problems and alleviate distress. Similar to OCD, the compulsive nature of BDD causes a grave interference and psychological toll on an individual's ability to function in everyday life. Conversely, these repetitive behaviors are widely misunderstood by some, thus constructing a stigma surrounding people diagnosed with BDD.

The stigma that is erroneously misinterpreted in BDD is the misconception of another disorder known as Narcissistic Personality Disorder, as the two disorders share a common factor between them placing grave attention to oneself, yet in contradiction, the former disorder perceives themselves positively while the latter in a negative light. The discrimination that surrounds BDD may lead to the individual's reluctance to seek professional treatment for fear of being deemed superficial and narcissistic (Schulte et al., 2020). Furthermore, the conflation of BDD with other mental health disorders may widen the discrimination for misunderstandings and ultimately undermine the overall severity of this psychological condition. The failure to treat and discern these symptoms at an early stage may lead to the development of other variations of eating and body dysmorphic disorders.

Research Objectives

1. To review existing literature on the societal perceptions, attitudes, and misconceptions surrounding body dysmorphia in the Philippines.
2. To analyze the cultural, social, and historical factors contributing to the perpetuation of stigma and misconceptions about body dysmorphia within the Philippine context.
3. To identify key interventions, strategies, and initiatives aimed at challenging and mitigating societal stigma towards individuals with body dysmorphia in the Philippines, as documented in the literature.
4. To explore the effectiveness and limitations of existing approaches in addressing the societal stigma associated with body dysmorphia, as evidenced by literature from both local and international sources.

METHODOLOGY

An integrative review is a methodology that provides various combinations of data, approaches, and information from existing research studies to determine and strengthen the analyses of a particular phenomenon (HTA 101: IV Integrative Methods, n.d.). This approach was then used in this study to systematically synthesize existing literature to challenge social stigmas related to body dysmorphia in the Philippines. This methodology is relevant to the study given that it is appropriate for an in-depth and diverse exploration of the main issue addressed related to the stigma associated with Body Dysmorphic Disorder (BDD) and its impact on the mental health of Filipino individuals. A systematized research approach was further developed to gather relevant evidence and literature. Therefore, this study seeks to distinguish between misconceptions to shed light on effective strategies for managing body stigma variables in the Philippines.

A comprehensive literature search was made through electronic databases such as Google Scholar, PsycINFO, and PubMed to establish relevant literature methodically. The keywords, namely "body dysmorphia," "body dysmorphic disorder," "body image," "societal stigma," "social norms," "Philippines," "misconceptions," and "prejudice" are used to conceptualize search outcomes broadly. 13 peer-reviewed empirical research papers and articles, theses, and dissertations were considered in the essence of deliberate examination. Among the articles gathered, eight (8) articles were published in Asia, whereas five (5) were published



in Western countries. Three of these papers were excluded due to limited information and differences in the research articles' scope, leading to 10 articles being included. The papers included were published in English from September 2016 to March 2024 in Western and Asian countries, heavily focusing on body dysmorphia in the Philippines. The data extracted from the selected studies include research titles, abstracts, methodology, demographics of participants, and key findings of the primal subject matter.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In order to collect the necessary data needed for the completion of the study, various literature related to the subject matter will be reviewed. The relevant literature will be utilized to shed light on different aspects of Body Dysmorphic Disorder (BDD). By connecting this literature, research gaps and objectives will be addressed. This, in turn, will provide a wider perspective and a broader understanding of Body Dysmorphic Disorder (BDD) and the societal stigma surrounding it.

1.1 Societal Perceptions Surrounding Body Dysmorphia in the Philippines

One study revealed that there is a positive relationship between external shame and body dysmorphia (Davies et al., 2022). It discussed that a person's perception of what others think about BDD patients (external shame) is related to concern about body dysmorphia. Another study stated that a minor abnormality in physical appearance already exaggerates in the minds of BDD patients, which causes them to feel ashamed and embarrassed (Foroughi et al., 2019). This leads to excessive mirror looking, as they try to hide or eliminate the perceived abnormality through the development of ritualistic behavior. This concept has been further stated by a study discussing that rising social media usage has led to additional challenges in how the public perceives patients with skin conditions that align with body dysmorphia (Jin, 2022). As a result, the patient's conditions and treatment are brought into the public realm, resulting in additional difficulties and complexities.

1.2 Attitudes Surrounding Body Dysmorphia in the Philippines

An attractive physique is commonly a preference for people with greater expectations for positive compliments and social feedback. Media has been a great medium for influences and common features of beauty. However, media influences on physical appearance positively correlate with BDD, as one study discussed that higher scores on sociocultural attitudes towards appearance and media pressure were predictive of higher scores on BDD (Ahmadpanah et al., 2019). This entails that media and societal perception greatly influence the conditions of patients with BDD as they are faced with expectations, pressures, and standards set by society.

1.3 Misconceptions Surrounding Body Dysmorphia in the Philippines

As with other mental illnesses, stigma towards BDD is often linked to seeking professional treatment. Common BDD patients perceive that as they seek or consult a professional, others may perceive them as 'vain'—an excessive manifestation of oneself, especially regarding physical appearance (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). A study reveals that in several cases, patients with BDD are ashamed to disclose their symptoms to a clinician, even though they wish for their clinicians to know about their condition (Phillips, 2006). In this case, BDD patients remain reluctant to consult with their excessive preoccupation with their physical appearance and stay untreated as it gradually affects the person over time.

2.1 Cultural factors contributing to the stigma and misconceptions about body dysmorphia in the Philippines

One of the things that hinder the recovery of BDD patients is the perpetuating stigma and misconceptions surrounding the said mental health issue. According to Tolosa and Mabulay (2023), both cultural and traditional beliefs influence mental health stigma. It was discussed in their study that one of the factors significantly contributing to the stigma is the cultural norms that usually connect mental well-being and spirituality, thereby relating mental health illnesses to supernatural causes and ancient beliefs. Moreover, traditional views and superstitions were also said to be one of the factors influencing mental health stigma. Due to traditional beliefs, mental health issues are frequently associated with personal weakness and labeled as taboo.

2.2 Social contributing to the stigma and misconceptions about body dysmorphia in the Philippines

One of the key barriers to a person's recovery from any mental illness is the social stigma. Social stigma is centered on how the public perceives mental health issues and those who are experiencing them. Ahmedani (2011) stated that mental and



behavioral disorders are more stigmatized compared to physical illnesses. Additionally, Rivera and Antonio (2017) highlighted that the perception of the public on mental health issues is influenced by the avoidance of people participating in discussions about the subject matter. This is one of the contributors to the social stigma surrounding mental health disorders. As long as it is not openly discussed in society, many individuals will still lack enough knowledge about mental health, leading to increased stigmatization.

2.3 Historical contributing to the stigma and misconceptions about body dysmorphia in the Philippines

Mental health disorders were typically overlooked in the past. Society did not pay attention to these types of disorders, thereby paving the way for ignorance and stereotypes about mental health. Mental illness was considered a punishment from God during the Middle Ages (Rossler, 2016). Furthermore, it was also revealed by Rossler (2016) that society in the past treated those who had a mental illness like criminals; they were imprisoned, tortured, or killed. These events indicate that stigma was already prevalent even before. This historical occurrence still influences how society perceives people with mental health issues nowadays. Even though violence and physical assault on those who had a mental illness before are less likely to occur now, individuals with mental health disorders are still subjected to stigmatization and misconceptions.

3.1 Key interventions

The importance of awareness and prevention concerning the nature of BDD is an integral factor in destigmatizing this destructive mental health disorder. In a similar study conducted by Escoton et al. (2023), mental health awareness programs were implemented in educational institutions, social media platforms, corporate organizations, and healthcare institutions to counteract the discrimination and external shame of individuals with BDD. These institutions can collectively cultivate a discussion about body positivity and initiate a fresh perspective on the importance of self-value and acceptance.

3.2 Strategies

The adverse impact of body dysmorphia on individuals has caused distress in the lives of the victims affected by its severe nature. The importance of addressing these societal stigmas towards BDD is a crucial measure in preventing the further negative impact that this disorder has caused. In a study conducted in 2023 involving the body shaming experiences of high school students in Davao City, Philippines, it was observed that one of the integral initiatives in mitigating the effects of BDD is through peer support, as positive reinforcement and validation help lessen feelings of self-dissatisfaction and body image discrepancy. Moreover, through peers' support, individuals can connect to people who share similar struggles, which helps alleviate feelings of stigmatization and isolation—overall, fostering an open community of acceptance and willingness to seek professional treatment without the fear of judgment.

3.3 Initiatives

Research and intensive investigation into the efficacy of these interventions is essential to distinguish gaps within services. By conducting studies regarding BDD, the impact of its stigma on individuals suffering from BDD, and the overall outcome of intervention programs, local mental healthcare providers and specialized organizations can identify discrepancies within these strategies and improve upon their services to better accommodate people who struggle with body dysmorphia. Ultimately, collaborating with researchers and implementing approaches that provide effective results in combating this destructive condition can potentially challenge and mitigate societal stigma toward body dysmorphic disorders in the Philippines.

4. Effectiveness and Limitations of Existing Approaches in Addressing Societal Stigma Associated with Body Dysmorphia

Body Dysmorphic Disorder is relatively unrecognized and untreated in both local and international settings. However, such conditions may differ according to variations in cultural influences, as there are many physical attributes and standards for people in their culture. Given that societal stigma has a greater relation to this problem, numerous interventions from different studies were considered to address the societal stigma associated with body dysmorphia. Supportive environment and social skills are effective interventions to help develop social skills deficits and engage in activities that promote positive self-esteem (Belani, 2023). Developing inner strength to cope with the negativities that may surround the mindset of the patients is a common key to addressing



the societal stigma around BDD. However, societal stigma is not only for BDD patients but also for the community that surrounds the diagnosed individuals. One study stated that a better approach to mental health education for individuals, especially students in universities or colleges, is multifaceted and enduring in fostering social adaptation (Jin, 2022).

Despite the presence of numerous interventions in addressing the societal stigma associated with body dysmorphia, some limitations construct an obstruction to addressing the issue. In a country like the Philippines, mental health education was mostly disregarded. A study revealed that in the Philippines, Filipino college students have an average mental health literacy score and below-average mental health inventory, average psychological well-being, and above-average psychological distress (Argao et al., 2021). This entails that the country has a population where they are relatively poor in understanding mental health issues and displays greater rates of psychological distress. In line with this, poor acknowledgment of mental illness, such as body dysmorphic disorder in the country, increases the chances of unrecognized or untreated conditions of the patients. Collective efforts and support in treating BDD and giving more recognition to public matters would possibly build an environment where diagnosed patients will develop more confidence in treasuring their physique and build confidence without seeking reassurance or noticing minor disfigurements on their bodies.

CONCLUSION

The results and findings of the study determined that external factors, including dermatological issues, external perception, sociocultural standards, and the societal pressures to conform to aforementioned beauty standards, contribute to the upsurge of Body Dysmorphic Disorders (BDD) in the Philippines. The physical dermatological impurities and deformities, such as mild acne vulgaris, eczema, and other related conditions, resulted in individuals attaining high BDD tendencies. Additionally, the role of public perception and external judgment critically affects individuals diagnosed with BDD to raise concerns regarding their body dysmorphia. In the modern age of technology, as well as the rapid insurgence of social media platforms, the public's perception and misconceptions of beauty have led to challenges within the body dysmorphic community. The pressure to abide by the media's standards of beauty has been revealed to be detrimental as they attain a high level of BDD to those who have undergone cosmetic alterations and bought skin-altering products in order to increase their physical self-satisfaction. The effects of BDD have been associated with severe mental disorders that are life-threatening, therefore the importance of understanding the various factors that cause this disorder is the way to mitigate the stigmas that surround BDD in the Philippines.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The researchers recommend further intensive research regarding the subject of Body Dysmorphic Disorder (BDD). This is paramount in advancing future researchers' broad understanding of body dysmorphia and its societal stigma in the Philippines, further investigating the effectiveness of numerous interventions intended for reducing the stigma surrounding body dysmorphia within the Philippine context. By conducting rigorous research, the researchers can develop reliable, effective, and evidence-based solutions for future programs and studies as well as policy initiatives, ultimately establishing an inclusive and supportive environment for individuals battling Body Dysmorphic Disorder (BDD) in the Philippines. Additionally, through this proposed action, future researchers can identify and examine further gaps of misconceptions regarding the societal stigma associated with BDD, simultaneously fostering in-depth analyses of literature-based research.

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