

Psychological concepts surrounding body dysmorphic disorder in the media industry

This is a preliminary version without graphics (to be added post-print)

Introduction:

What is body dysmorphic disorder?

Body dysmorphic disorder (BDD) is a mental disorder where individuals are preoccupied with perceived flaws of their body, leading to significant distress and/or impairment (Bulhman, 2009). Rapid physical and hormonal changes during adolescence is theorized to contribute or trigger the development of BDD, where aesthetic sensitivity and awareness to body-image is heightened (Phillips, 2005; Veale & Neziroglu, 2010)

Are celebrities more susceptible to BDD?

The Los Angeles Times article entitled "Miley Cyrus rails against 'Hannah Montana' for body image, anxiety issues" recaps a recent interview with the celebrity singer/actress and how she blames her role in the mega-hit TV show "Hannah Montana" for causing body dysmorphia.

"I was told for so long what a girl is supposed to be from being on that show. I was made to look like someone that I wasn't... I had been made pretty every day for so long, and then when I wasn't on that show, it was like, 'Who the **** am I?'"
Miley Cyrus, Marie Claire Magazine 2015

The article paints a broader picture of the vulnerability celebrities may feel about their bodies under the relentless demands of the media industry, and the identity issues which may arise from it. This research paper seeks to bridge this case study from media sources to research findings and to extrapolate using psychological concepts.

Methods:

Library Resources:

Web of Science, PubMed, Google Scholar, and various other databases were used through the York University Library research guides to find articles. The research question in this study was to see how research on body dysmorphia may be applicable to media findings about celebrities and body image issues.

Research:

Investigating the psychological phenomenon which may be contributing to an increased susceptibility to body image issues and body dysmorphia in individuals in the media industry using scientific literature review and modern psychological concepts.

Results:

Why do we value our bodies so much?

Operant conditioning of attractiveness and body image could be a reason why. Operant conditioning is how an organism learns to respond to a stimulus according to its consequences. When having certain physical attributes is presented with rewarding stimulus, such as praise and compliments, the behaviours relating to those attributes are being positively reinforced and the tendency to present those features increases. This is consistent with the law of effect, in which the association between a stimulus and a response is strengthened when it results with satisfying effects. Alternatively, if we are teased or embarrassed in relation to a physical characteristic, the tendency to hide or eliminate those characteristics is strengthened. This negative reinforcement can cause a preoccupation with one's image, and in context to the world of celebrity stardom, it is not difficult to imagine how Miley might develop BDD under the magnifying glass of the media.

Your biology likes those Instagram likes

Delving deeper into this theory, events which satisfy our biological needs are primary reinforcers, which are events that are intrinsically reinforced; such as food, water, sex, and may include affection. Secondary reinforcers are events which have reinforcing characteristics due to their association with primary reinforcers – praise for being attractive or desirable would be a secondary reinforcer in context to satisfying the primary reinforcer of sex and affection. Acquiring praise from peers and furthering fame could be secondary reinforcers for Miley. In the world of entertainment, an emphasis on having sexually attractive features is often selected for, and a lack of these characteristics can lead to comparative behaviour and negative emotional responses (such as guilt, shame, and anxiety). These sociocultural selection pressures could be major driving factors in Miley's development of BDD, and more ordinarily, in the general population.

Erikson's Stage Theory: Who am I? A search for identity

According to Erikson's Stage Theory, our personalities are shaped by how we deal with a developmental struggle between two conflicting inclinations. The development of Miley's supposed body dysmorphic disorder could be because of a failure to deal with the psychosocial crisis during her adolescence, when rapid physical and hormonal changes take place. According to Erikson's Stage Theory, this developmental stage is known as "Identity versus confusion", where the fundamental question of this stage is "Who am I and where am I going?".

"From the time I was 11, it was, 'You're a pop star! That means you have to be blond, and you have to have long hair, and you have to put on some glittery tight thing.' Meanwhile, I'm this fragile little girl playing a 16-year-old in a wig and a ton of makeup. It was like 'Toddlers & Tiaras.' I had fucking flip-flops."
- Miley Cyrus, Marie Claire Magazine 2015

Miley's occupational demands of constantly changing identities could've led her to fail this psychosocial crisis, leading to confusion in her own identity and cause an obsessive preoccupation with her body.

Unconscious determinants, displacement, and perfectionism

If we explore alternatives to the causation of Miley's BDD, a Freudian or Jungian analysis would point to the unconscious determinants of personality as causation of psychological disorder. Freud's conception of the mind would predict that her BDD sourced from forgotten childhood trauma, hidden feelings of hostility toward a parent, and/or unconscious psychosexual disturbances during her childhood, such as repressed sexual desires. If the true root of Miley's BDD was indeed from some unconscious determinant from her past, then the blame being put on the professional pressures of the entertainment industry would be a form of displacement. Displacement is the diversion of emotional feelings from the original source to a substitute target.

The displacement of blame, and perhaps even shame, could be in a narcissistic effort at body image perfectionism. This displacement takes the blame off of Miley as a product of a neurotic need for perfection in reaction to her feelings of inferiority, and may even explain an obsessive focus on body image. Unconscious determinants would also play a role, where a destructive superego (determinants below our consciousness) would cause a ruthless push for achievement and conflict with the reality principle, that is the ego – where the attainment of aesthetic perfection in the eyes of the media is unrealistic and unattainable.

The research linking BDD with suicide and surgery

Increased suicidal ideation and attempts

Individuals with BDD were ten times more likely to think about suicide (31.0% versus 3.5%) and attempt suicide (22.2% versus 2.1%) compared to individuals without BDD – although this was found to be slightly higher than their previous study. BDD persons were observed to be five times more likely to undergo cosmetic surgery (15.6% versus 3.0%), however this was much higher than the previous study conducted by Bulhman (7.2%) – they attribute this difference by the possible rise in social acceptance of cosmetic surgery.

Increased preoccupation with certain body parts:

In light of this research, Miley Cyrus' body image issues could source from the pressures of appeasing and upholding the standards of beauty in the media and by the demands of fulfilling different roles as an actress. This pressure could be translated into specific goals and desires in certain body parts, where the selection pressures of the media industry could be causing the greatest discrepancies in concern of body parts (BDD vs. non-BDD individuals, respectively): breasts (22.2% vs. 6.4%), hips/buttocks (33.3% vs. 14.6%), stomach (42.2% vs. 20.2%), skin (33.3% vs. 5.4%), hair (15.6% vs. 7.5%), and nose (15.6% vs. 4.5%).

Conclusion:

In a wider sense, the results of this research, and how an obsessive preoccupation with certain body parts leads to harmful behaviours, could provide a link to the increasing interconnectivity of social influence, and how the pervasiveness of the media has saturated not only the lives of those who consume it but consuming those who are a part of it.