
THE IMPORTANCE OF PERSONAL IMAGE AND THE STIGMATIZATION OF VISIBLE FACE DIFFERENCES IN ROMANIAN SOCIETY

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Abstract:

People with visible face differences in Romania face stigma in the context of the growing importance of body image in contemporary Romanian society, influenced by mass media and advertising. Social constructionism, labelling theory and Pierre Bourdieu's symbolic capital are the main theoretical fields from the perspective of which the research subject is analysed.

The article investigates, through qualitative methods, the emotional, social, educational and labour market challenges faced by this category of people from the perspective of Romanian professional staff with whom individuals with visible facial differences interact.

The results show that people with disfigurements are prone to discrimination, disadvantages related to study or employment opportunities, early school dropout, unemployment, frequent job changes or lower-paid jobs. They also experience difficulties in establishing personal relationships, marginalization, isolation, stigmatization, harassment.

Strategies suggested by respondents to address these challenges included awareness and information campaigns at all levels for better social integration, providing training to professionals to improve their capacity to respond in an inclusive manner.

In conclusion, the study highlights the imperative need to make people with disfigurements heard in society by understanding their experiences and needs, eliminating negative connotations associated with the perception of their appearance, and reforming social perception through training activities, especially among professionals.

Keywords:

Face visible difference, self-image, social image construction, social labelling, symbolic capital, stigmatization.

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INTRODUCTION

The importance of image in contemporary society, especially in Romania, has reached unprecedented heights, profoundly influencing individual and collective perceptions. The concept of "image" goes beyond mere aesthetics, encompassing the symbolic value and social capital it confers. In public communication, image plays a fundamental role in shaping the way individuals and institutions are perceived and interact. This visual pre-eminence requires a rigorous sociological analysis of the way in which image is constructed, maintained and, in certain cases, becomes a source of stigmatization.

In Romania, people with facial differences, whether congenital (such as craniofacial malformations or haemangiomas) or acquired through trauma or medical conditions (such as burns or visible dermatological conditions), face significant difficulties at emotional, social, health, educational and labour market levels (Changing Faces, n. d.).

In Romania, there are no statistics on the prevalence of people with visible facial deformities and differences, no studies have been conducted, and this population category does not benefit from non-governmental organizations that represent their interests and provide them with support services. In Romania, these people are possibly included in the broader category of people with disabilities, of which we know that in March 2023, 886,950 people were registered (Ministry of Labour and Social Protection, 2023).

Romanian legislation recognizes and seeks to sanction various forms of discrimination, including those related to physical appearance. The Methodology for Preventing and Combating Moral Harassment at Work (2023) defines harassment as including "comments about a person's physical appearance or character, likely to cause embarrassment or distress". This provides a legal framework to protect individuals from such behaviour in the workplace.

The National Council for Combating Discrimination (CNCD) has the authority to impose sanctions for acts of discrimination, which can range from warnings to administrative fines, however, the analysis of multiple discrimination cases between 2012 and 2020 shows that "physical appearance" was a criterion invoked in 3 out of 25 decisions. In these cases, the fines applied were often "very low" and were not always applied "proportionately, consistently and in accordance with the gravity of the act". This inconsistency in the application of sanctions suggests a limitation in the effectiveness of the existing legislative framework to determine discrimination based on physical appearance.

In Western and Northern European countries, in particular due to non-governmental organisations, such as Changing Faces (UK-based, but influential across Europe) the situation of people with visible facial deformities and differences is more documented. According to research by Changing Faces, there are over 10 million people with visible facial disfigurements in the world. In the UK at least 1.3 million children, young people, and adults are estimated to have significant disfigurements, including 569,000 with facial disfigurements, meaning one in five people across the UK self-identify as having a visible difference (Changing Faces, n.d.). They offer a valuable insight into the potential scale across other European countries, given similar demographics and prevalence of conditions.

According to studies conducted to date, people with different appearances are victims of significant stigma, with complex and profound implications for the psychological and social well-being of the people concerned. These people face psychological difficulties: high rates of depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, social isolation, negative social experiences: insistent stares, negative comments, avoidance, verbal and physical aggression (hate crimes), systemic discrimination: in



education (bullying), employment, access to services, as Cole & Rumsey (2013) and Rumsey & Harcourt (2005) have demonstrated.

This stigma is not just a matter of individual perception, but it is deeply rooted in social constructions of beauty and in the way the media, social media, advertising and celebrities contribute to the perpetuation of the appearance ideals.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Given the lack of research in the field, this article aims to investigate the perception and experiences of professionals who interact or may find themselves in a situation of interacting with people with visible facial differences on the level and forms of stigma these individuals face, especially during their educational trajectory, but also on the labour market, with the aim of documenting and implementing a targeted educational intervention among professionals to reduce the systemic disadvantages faced by people with visible facial differences and to ensure a friendlier and more inclusive environment.

In order to understand the dynamics of image in society and to be able to analyse the challenges faced by people with visible facial deformities and differences, in this article we will address three essential theoretical frameworks: social constructionism, labelling theory and Pierre Bourdieu's concept of symbolic capital.

Social constructionism provides fundamental lens for understanding that beauty is not an intrinsic reality or a universal value, but a social construction. This theory, promoted by pioneers such as Berger and Luckmann in their seminal work *The Social Construction of Reality* (1966), emphasizes that human beings rationalize their experiences by creating models of the social world, which they disseminate and solidify through language.

A central goal of social constructionism is to uncover the ways in which individuals and groups participate in the construction of their perceived reality, analysing how social phenomena are created, institutionalized, known, and introduced into tradition. Applied to standards of beauty, this means that aesthetic ideals are not inherent or inevitable, but are products of ongoing social interaction, influenced by language and discourse. As Burr (2015) emphasizes in *Social Constructionism*, our concepts of the world are formed through social interactions, not by the discovery of pre-existing truths. Therefore, standards of beauty are likely to change over time.

This understanding is crucial because it recognizes that what is considered "beautiful" in a given culture, including Romania, is a fluid concept, shaped by societal norms, media, and interpersonal interactions. In this context, "beautiful" physicality is not just a personal trait, but, as other theorists argue, becomes a social resource that reinforces the social value of the individual (Halliwel & Dittmar, 2004). This has significant implications for how we perceive and value physical appearance in contemporary society.

Labelling theory is an essential framework for understanding how society's reactions to perceived deviance, such as facial differences, can lead to stigmatization and what is called secondary deviance (Becker, 1963). According to this theory, no behaviour is deviant in itself, but becomes so as a result of social interactions and the process of labelling by agents of social control, such as institutions or community members (Lemert, 1951). The labelling process involves several stages: the manifestation of a physical difference or deviant behaviour, its observation by society, the application of the label, and, finally, the adoption of a behaviour by the stigmatized person, consistent with the imposed label, a phenomenon known as secondary deviance (Goffman, 1963).

The consequences of this labelling can be profound: studies show that people who are negatively labelled can develop low self-esteem, self-rejection, and behaviour considered deviant

(Hier, 2005). Thus, this perspective explains how a visible facial difference, as a physical characteristic, can become a major social problem due to social perception and categorization. The process begins with society noticing this difference, followed by labelling the person as "abnormal," "unattractive," or "unhappy" (Link & Phelan, 2001). The label, once applied, can be internalized, influencing the individual's self-perception and behaviour, generating a self-fulfilling prophecy that validates the initial label (Scheff, 1966).

Although some critics suggest that labels may only identify real behaviours, the theory emphasizes that labelling actually creates secondary deviance and deviant identities. This means that societal prejudice, through the mechanism of labelling, can lead to real and tangible disadvantages for individuals with facial differences, not only through external discrimination, but also through internal psychological impact.

Negative social perceptions associated with facial differences are widespread and have a profound impact. This reverses the "halo effect" (where attractiveness leads to positive assumptions about other features), demonstrating a "stigma effect" in which a visible difference generates a cascade of negative, unfounded assumptions about a person's character and abilities (Rumsey & Harcourt, 2005). This explains why individuals with facial differences face disadvantages in employment, education, and social interactions: these perceptions influence decision-makers and colleagues, creating systemic barriers based on appearance rather than actual competence. The psychological impact of stigma is often more difficult to manage than the physical condition itself. The effects of stigma can be devastating, leading to social isolation, depression, and anxiety (Corrigan, 2004). Stigmatized individuals tend to gradually withdraw from social life, avoiding interactions with family, friends, and colleagues. This isolation, although a self-defence mechanism against judgment and rejection, paradoxically deepens existing problems and reduces the chances of recovery and social reintegration.

Symbolic capital, according to Pierre Bourdieu, is a powerful concept for analysing how physical appearance can function as a form of capital. Symbolic capital represents any form of capital (physical, economic, cultural, social) that, once perceived and recognized by social agents, confers prestige and legitimacy on the possessor (Bourdieu, 1984). It allows an individual to obtain a certain "aura" and social recognition in his environment. Physical attractiveness, as a form of symbolic capital, can generate tangible social and economic benefits, being valued in various contexts such as interpersonal relationships, the labour market, or the social environment (Lauzen et al., 2007). Therefore, a person with appreciated physical features can benefit from an "aura" or social prestige, facilitating access to resources and opportunities.

In contrast, facial differences that are often devalued can constitute a deficit of symbolic capital, leading to systemic disadvantages and discrimination (Cain, 2010). This transforms the abstract notion of "beauty" into a quantifiable social resource, explaining why physical attractiveness brings benefits and offers social advantages, while visible differences impose penalties in certain social contexts (Bourne & Lemaine, 2020). Thus, symbolic capital becomes a tool through which physical appearance is valued or devalued depending on existing social norms and values.

To effectively inform professional interventions, this analysis will explore the primary factors contributing to the formation of social and symbolic image capital in Romania. Specifically, it will investigate how these factors propagate negative perceptions and labelling of individuals with visible facial differences, ultimately identifying effective intervention strategies and the professional levers through which they can be implemented.

The media play a central role in defining and disseminating ideals of beauty, exerting considerable influence on individual perceptions and behaviours. This influence manifests itself



through various channels, from traditional print and television to new social media platforms and commercial advertising.

Traditional print and television have long been pillars in shaping public image. The media is often referred to as the "fourth power in the State" precisely because of its ability to shape opinions through the way journalists choose to present reality. This power allows them to "demonize characters or create heroes," influencing public perceptions of individuals and groups (Gerbner & Gross, 1976). However, the power of the media is not absolute; it depends on the context and on people's preexisting beliefs, suggesting that the media often act as an amplifier of existing biases and social norms, rather than as an independent creator of them.

The role of the media is to reflect, but also to propel these changes, reinforcing certain aesthetic norms and, implicitly, contributing to the marginalization of those who do not fit the promoted patterns.

The emergence and proliferation of social media platforms have exponentially amplified the dissemination of beauty ideals, bringing with them new challenges to young people's self-esteem (Holland & Tiggemann, 2016). This indicates that, despite the potential for self-expression and connection, social media is simultaneously becoming a powerful vector for harmful comparisons and unrealistic beauty ideals. Although social media has replaced celebrities as a source of inspiration for beauty advice, it can also become a space that promotes toxic beauty standards and advice. The consequence is a complex and often harmful psychological impact on young users, highlighting the need for a nuanced approach to digital literacy and mental health support. Advertising and celebrities also exert considerable influence in shaping perceptions and behaviours related to image. The media industry, considered a "feeling industry," uses the image of famous women to shape consumer behaviours (Featherstone, 1991). Advertising actively promotes the image of an "eternal young, beautiful, attractive, and ready-to-wear woman," transforming the "feminine guarantor" into a veritable "currency of exchange" (Swami & Furnham, 2012). This commercialization of beauty reinforces narrow definitions of attractiveness, contributing to societal pressures to conform.

This idealized representation is often the result of subtle manipulation. The media manipulates by identifying the "insecurities, fears, and weaknesses" of the public and using them to impose certain behaviours, without resorting to direct coercion (Halliwell & Dittmar, 2004).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

We have applied a qualitative research approach based on semi-structured interviews. We chose this method in order to enable in-depth exploration of nuanced experiences and perceptions of professionals who regularly interact with, or may encounter individuals with facial disfigurements or visible face differences. The semi-structured format allowed for a flexible yet guided conversation, ensuring that key themes were covered while also permitting interviewees to elaborate on their unique insights and perspectives.

The interviews were conducted with Romanian professionals, especially from caring and helping professions. Aiming to gather their perspectives and experiences, acknowledging the varying socio-cultural contexts and healthcare systems. The interview guidelines have been pretested before being applied. The approach aimed to collect substantial, descriptive data directly from the participants, providing a deep understanding of the challenges and needs related to face equality and social-educational interventions.

The aim of the research was to present a sociological analysis based on professional collected data to develop social and educational initiatives targeted on professionals, especially belonging from education and helping professions aimed at improving interactions and support for individuals



with facial disfigurements. This analysis sought to inform the design and implementation of effective and relevant training programs and initiatives.

The data collection took place from November 2023 to March 2024 and involved a total of 15 Romanian professionals, including 6 trainers and teachers, 5 psychologists, and counsellors, 2 nurses, 2 social workers, ensuring a diverse range of perspectives from education and helping professions, especially, thus providing insights from various socio-cultural contexts.

FINDINGS

All participants agreed that individuals with disfigurements are disadvantaged in the Romanian society. They commonly cited bullying, stigmatization, marginalization, low self-esteem, lack of confidence, difficulties in forming personal relationships, and isolation as frequent disadvantages. People with visible face differences face significant systemic disadvantages in various spheres of life, from access to public institutions, education to the labour market.

Access to public services and interaction with state institutions is another area in which people with visible face differences encounter barriers and discrimination. Although there is a legislative framework for the protection and promotion of the rights of people with disabilities, its observance "leaves much to be desired" in practice. People with visible facial differences have to accept longer waiting times, lack of friendliness at the counter, and difficult problem solving. Although projects with European funds have been implemented in many state institutions to ensure an inclusive climate and equal access for people with disabilities, there are often communication barriers between staff and visible facial differences people that stem from indifference, prejudice, discrimination, reluctance, lack of knowledge, and the fear of not being insistent or of disturbing the other person's sensitivity. This significant discrepancy between legislative intent and practical implementation remains a major problem, and numerous interventions are needed to remedy the problems.

The challenges visible difference individuals may face during their educational trajectory are reported only by one third of the respondents, most of respondents considering they are generally benefiting of non-discrimination and equal treatment in kindergartens, schools and universities. However, in some cases, persons with visible difference appearance need to make more efforts in the educational process trying to compensate their difference and in order to be accepted and valued. In some other cases respondents mentioned early school dropout of visible difference individuals.

In the investigation of the educational experiences, a substantial proportion of respondents (approximately two-thirds) reported perceptions of non-discrimination and equitable treatment within kindergarten, school, and university settings of individuals with visible face differences. Conversely, about one-third of participants indicated encountering challenges of these individuals throughout their educational trajectories.

A nuanced examination of these findings reveals that, in certain instances, individuals with visible face differences may engage in compensatory efforts within the educational process. This often involves expending additional cognitive and social resources to offset perceived disadvantages associated with their appearance, with the implicit or explicit goal of achieving acceptance and recognition. Furthermore, a minority of respondents reported instances of early school dropout among individuals with visible face differences, suggesting that for some, the cumulative burden of these challenges can lead to disengagement from formal education.

Bullying is a serious problem in Romanian schools, as demonstrated by the most recent studies (Iordache, Claudiu, Bucs, Banca & Motoi, 2025). Although this study does not directly link bullying to physical appearance, in the broader context of labelling theory and negative perceptions



associated with facial differences, it is a strong and logical inference that students with visible facial differences are at increased risk of being targets of bullying. Bullying is a direct behavioural manifestation of social rejection and the application of negative labels. This situation can lead to social exclusion and negative educational experiences, affecting the academic performance and social development of children and adolescents. General stigmatization leads to "social isolation" and "discrimination", and the school environment, being a space of intense socialization, becomes a fertile ground for the manifestation of these phenomena in the case of children with visible differences.

Regarding employment access, the prevailing perception among respondents is that individuals with visible differences experience significant disadvantage, particularly within front-facing and appearance-dependent professions. These individuals are frequently relegated to lower-paying positions, often involving manual labor and reduced responsibilities, and face considerable barriers to securing coordination or leadership roles. Furthermore, opportunities for hierarchical advancement and salary increases are notably constrained.

This consistent reporting of employment challenges, especially in roles where physical appearance is a salient factor, underscores the profound impact of visible differences on professional trajectories. Such discriminatory patterns in the labor market serve to reinforce existing social inequalities, limiting economic mobility and perpetuating marginalization for this category of individuals.

Respondents indicate that discrimination based on appearance has gained relevance as the obsession with physical beauty has swept Romanian society, under the influence of the wave of Western opinions. This perception highlights a widespread problem, with "the existence of a disability and an unpleasant physical appearance" being considered the main reasons for discrimination in (re)insertion into the labour market, for both women and men. In some situations, physical appearance is a factor of discrimination in employment.

These data suggest not only a penalty for people with facial differences (an "ugliness penalty"), but also an active advantage for individuals considered conventionally attractive (a "beauty premium") (Biddle & Hamermesh, 1994). This creates a dual system in which physical appearance functions as a significant, often undeclared, form of social capital (Kanazawa, 2018). This situation highlights the systemic nature of appearance-based discrimination, where the labour market rewards certain aesthetic features while penalizing others, leading to tangible economic inequalities.

Furthermore, dissatisfaction with physical appearance and body weight is closely linked to low self-esteem, depression, and anxiety, increasing the risk of self-harm and suicidal behaviour among people with visible facial differences. This impact on their mental health has a direct impact on employability, as low self-esteem, social anxiety, and a negative perception of oneself can hinder job search efforts, interview performance, and overall professional integration. This forms a complex feedback loop, in which societal standards of beauty, individual psychological well-being, and economic opportunities are deeply interconnected, creating compounded disadvantages that are often ignored in policy discussions focused solely on physical barriers.

The majority of respondents emphasized the effectiveness of information and awareness campaigns at all levels. They also suggested courses and training for professional staff working in institutions, as well as training for individuals with disfigurements to boost self-confidence, self-acceptance, and relationship-building skills. These recommendations underscore the importance of education and support in empowering individuals with facial differences.



All participants expressed interest in having training in this area, believing it would enhance their skills and knowledge to better support individuals with facial differences and their families. They also hoped to learn new strategies and approaches for working with these individuals and educating others to cease marginalization.

DISCUSSIONS

The interview results align with Bourdieu's theory of symbolic capital, suggesting that individuals with visible facial differences may face challenges in accumulating social prestige and recognition due to societal biases and perceptions (Swartz, 1997). The perceived disadvantages directly impact the symbolic capital of individuals with facial differences. Bullying, stigmatization, and difficulties in forming relationships can diminish their social standing and self-worth. These factors contribute to a devaluation of an individual's social worth and influence according to their image capital and the revalorization they are subjected to due to their different appearance.

The professionals' perceptions underscore the importance of addressing stigma and promoting social inclusion (Goffman, 1963). The emphasis on awareness campaigns and training programs reflects a need for education and support to empower individuals with facial differences and challenge negative stereotypes (Corrigan, 2004).

Given that professionals' attitudes and behaviours can significantly influence the symbolic capital of individuals with facial differences, it is essential to provide them with appropriate training and resources. This can lead to more positive interactions and greater social inclusion. The suggestions for awareness campaigns and training programs align with strategies for accumulating symbolic capital. Education and advocacy can challenge negative perceptions and promote a more inclusive society.

The unanimous interest in further training signals a strong desire among professionals to improve their ability to support individuals with facial differences, to become aware of their social constructs concerning individuals' image in their professional activity, to deconstruct stereotypes and prejudices of beauty ideals and expectations which media and television provided and fed-up society to saturation, be able to see and interact with visible face difference individuals beyond labels. This can also be a call to action for policymakers and organizations to invest in such training programs.

The application of labelling theory demonstrates how a facial difference, initially a physical feature, becomes a source of stigma through negative societal perception and labelling. This labelling generates a cascade of unfounded assumptions about a person's character and competence, transforming the "halo effect" into a "stigmatization effect." The consequences materialize in significant systemic disadvantages in the labour market, where physical appearance is a more frequent factor of discrimination than gender, and in the educational environment, where bullying is a constant threat. Although there is a legislative framework and commendable initiatives from NGOs, the practical implementation of anti-discrimination policies in state institutions remains a challenge, creating additional barriers for people with visible differences.

In order to build a truly inclusive society in Romania, it is imperative to address this issue on several levels. Extensive media education is needed to promote a more diverse and healthy understanding of beauty, countering the toxic standards propagated by the online environment and advertising. Psychosocial support programs for people with facial differences and their families must also be strengthened, recognizing that the emotional and social impact is as important as the medical one. In addition, a more rigorous and consistent application of anti-discrimination legislation, accompanied by adequate funding and a cultural change within public institutions, is crucial to ensure accessibility and fair treatment for all citizens, regardless of their physical appearance.



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CONCLUSIONS

The interview results confirm that professionals perceive individuals with facial differences as facing significant social disadvantages. This perception is crucial because these professionals (teachers, health professionals, counsellors, social workers) are in positions to influence the lives and outcomes of these individuals.

From the perspective of people with disabilities, physical appearance is one of the criteria by which people differentiate themselves. This direct perception from those affected validates the problem of discrimination based on physical appearance in Romanian society, including the interactions with state institutions. This situation demonstrates that simply adopting laws is not enough. Rigorous enforcement, adequate funding and cultural change within institutions are needed to ensure genuine inclusion.

The analysis of the importance of image and the stigmatization of facial differences in Romanian society reveals a complex and often difficult reality for affected individuals. Image, as a dynamic social construct, is constantly shaped by the media, advertising and celebrities, who often perpetuate unrealistic beauty ideals of which individuals are not always aware. This phenomenon has a profound psychosocial impact, conducting to labelling, isolation, education and employment stigmatization of those who are at the extremes of these image ideals, such as the visible face differences individuals, pushing them to the margins of society.

These findings underscore the complex interplay between visible difference, social perception, and educational outcomes, warranting further qualitative and quantitative inquiry into the specific mechanisms and long-term implications of these reported experiences.

Future research could explore the experiences of individuals with facial differences themselves and examine the effectiveness of different intervention strategies.

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Acknowledgements: Erasmus+ Project "Face Equality: Innovative training in the health, social and volunteering sectors that will empower people with disfigurements to overcome social and psychological challenges in everyday life", 2022-1-NL01-KA220-VET00008.