

A review of the literature on the complex relationship between stigma and naturism

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Abstract

For many decades naturism has been viewed as a controversial behavior. The term naturism is sometimes used interchangeably with nudity, though failure to differentiate these expressions highlights the current lack of knowledge surrounding this activity and can lead to sexualization of the behavior. The research method adopted here was an electronic search of the published literature on stigma and its components (discrimination and stereotyping). The results of the search revealed a considerable gap in the existing literature surrounding the link between stigma towards the act of engaging in naturism. Perceptions, attitudes, and beliefs towards naturism are complex, multifaceted, and vary dependent on factors including law, location, religion, and the situation-specific feature of naturism. Naturism has received sizeable presence on social media and in press. Anecdotal evidence from media representation suggests that naturists can experience severe consequences associated with engaging in this behavior. However, there is currently a shortage of empirical research studies to support this assumption that have focused on stigma towards naturism so no firm conclusions can yet be drawn. Given the reported rise in those engaging in naturism, and the provocative media portrayals, it is imperative that attitudes and beliefs about naturism are further unraveled empirically through rigorous research. This review draws attention to the ill-understood and complex relationship that exists between stigma and naturism.

Keywords: Naturism; Nudity; Stigma; Beliefs; Attitudes; Review

1. Introduction

In today's society, any kind of behavior that does not meet the societal norms can be labeled as deviant. Due to the sensitivity of the topic of naturism, general members of the public may not have an in-depth understanding of the behavior. Even though naturism is a controversial topic, there are many provocative representations of the behavior in press and on social media. Naturism is gaining further attention from the public, with more individuals engaging in the behavior. As such, it is imperative to explore the complex relationship between naturism and the stigma associated with it.

2. Stigma, stereotyping and discrimination

Historically, the term stigma has received different conceptualizations, such as cuts or burn marks on criminals, slaves, and traitors, in order to easily identify them as people who are immoral and should be avoided, however, stigma nowadays is considered to be an attribute resulting in social disapproval [1]. There are various ways in which stigma can be expressed in society. Depending on the situation, it can present itself in an observable way, or manifest itself using subtle means. Individuals can reject (groups of) people socially, practice avoidance and refuse to interact with one another [2]. Moreover, stigmatization might occur as a nonverbal expression of discomfort (e.g., avoiding eye contact,

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keeping distant from certain individuals) which may lead to tense interactions amongst individual in society [3]. Independent of how it is manifested, it is imperative to consider stigma as a concept that is present globally. Indeed, almost any behavior or characteristic might be perceived as deviant by any specific observer [4]. Thus, it is possible to stigmatize any kind of deviation among individuals.

The meaning of stigma changes over time [5, 6] and it is not a valid concept only for minorities [7]. It is perpetuated by individuals who possess power against other members of the society with less power [8]. Once established, stigmatized individuals experience distinct stigma related processes, such as structural inequalities, stereotypes and prejudice, discrimination, rejection, and stress [7]. It has been alleged that stigma can differ in terms of the devaluation of the stigmatized individual or group [9, 10, 11, 12]. For example, some stigmas are related to particular aspects of an individual, such as being overweight or identifying as a homosexual. However, other stigmas such as mental illnesses, involve devaluation of a wider range of an individual's characteristics [13]. These individuals who experience more narrowly defined stigmas are more likely to reduce the impact of negative effects of their stigma in comparison to those who experience stigma relevant to wider range of their characteristics.

The rights and freedoms of individuals who are stigmatized are limited when compared to their non-stigmatized counterparts, thus they are prevented from fully participating in society, causing them to have a lower social status than their non-stigmatized counterparts [14]. Existence of social stigma may also lead to prejudice and stereotype. Despite the majority of individuals being aware of a given stereotype, they may not necessarily find the stereotype to be true and valid [15]. Prejudice on the other hand occurs when an individual finds the stereotype to be true and valid and then applies generalizations of it in their attitudes and judgments [15, 16]. Consequently, stereotypes and prejudice are interrelated psychological processes, which stem from social stigma [7].

Stereotypes are the cognitive component of mental representations or attitudes. Prejudices refer to the affective component of a biased behavior that puts individuals at a disadvantage based on their group membership. Discrimination is a critical term when it comes to making sense of problems linked to diversity [17]. Discrimination differs from both stereotypes and prejudices. Discrimination is defined as a behavior that is based on ascriptive characteristics of a minority group (for example, race and ethnicity). Discrimination is related to the behavioral outcome impacted by stereotypes and prejudices [18]. Discrimination might be experienced due to the ascribed characteristics which are socially attributed to a group and might include traits such as gender, sexual orientation, age, education, physical disabilities, religion, race, ethnicity, or even socio-economic background of an individual [19].

Individuals who are discriminated against are likely to suffer from stigma-related stress and may be perceived as threatening or less intelligent compared to their non-stigmatized peers [20]. This may result in the production of cumulative stress and distressing encounters [7]. Individuals who are stigmatized may go about their social interactions with an unconscious expectation that other society members may reject them, or treat them differently, due to the perceived stigma present within the society [21, 22]. Thus, the expectation of rejection might trigger a cognitive burden whether the rejection occurs or not.

Indeed, stereotypes are primarily cognitive. They are defined as the common beliefs (for example, knowledge and expectations) amongst the members of one group that are about the shared characteristics of another group [23, 24, 25, 26]. Stereotyping allows individuals to process information in an easier and more efficient manner, but it can lead to biased judgment, or even discriminating behavior towards individuals who belong to a particular group, such as immigrants [27]. The term stereotype was brought to the field of psychology by Lippman [28]. Since then, many researchers have offered several definitions to the term [29], which as a result has plagued the concept of stereotype with excess meanings such as *"incorrect beliefs"* [30, p.181], *"the attribution of general psychological characteristics to large human groups"* [31, p. 150] and *"fixed ideas about an individual or a group"* [32, p. 227].

Research suggests that individuals who are subject to negative stereotyping might suffer from multifaceted negative effects such as internalized stigma [33]. Internalized stigma (or self-stigma) is experienced due to individuals absorbing assumptions either cognitively or emotionally by believing and applying these stigmatized assumptions to themselves [34, 35]. As a result of experiencing internalized stigma, individuals might suffer from depression [36, 37], social avoidance [38], lower levels of self-esteem [38], difficulty coping with everyday challenges and may become more likely to experience worsening psychiatric symptoms [39, 40]. Stigma not only poses a threat to the individual, but also their immediate family, as both the stigmatized individuals and their family often experience feelings of fear, shame, distrust, anger, hopelessness, and secrecy [41]. Experiencing shame, hopelessness, social isolation, and lower levels of self-esteem as a consequence of self-stigma can even result in suicide attempts [42, 43, 44]. Finally, with regard to researching such socially sensitive issues like discrimination and stereotyping, there remains a discrepancy between the tolerant self-reported attitudes and behaviors towards minority groups and the individuals' lived experience [45].

3. Naturism as a stigmatized behavior

Naturism is a stigmatized behavior in so far as it has been linked to offensive and inferior connotations [46]. Public nudity has been considered a perverted, deviant, and demeaning behavior [47]. Therefore, public perceptions and attitudes towards nudism range from suspicion and embarrassment to hostility [48]. Nudism and naturism are expressions that have been used interchangeably to refer to those who choose to remove their clothes. Naturists, however, might choose to strip off their clothes in order to reap the health benefits [49]. Naturism has its roots in the ancient human history, as Greek Olympic athletes used to compete naked [49]. Nudity was commonly practiced from a religious perspective, and it was described as an attempt to return to *the pure state of innocence* of Adam and Eve [49].

Until the Victorian era, individuals frequently engaged in naked swimming, as clothes were considered dangerous to the swimmer due to being voluminous. However, with the invention of the bathing suit in the 1870s, the practice of naked swimming (also known as skinny dipping) and social nudity ceased to be considered the norm [49]. Clothing was thought to be an emblematic of class distinctions in society and part of an oppressive psychological sexual regime [50]. Around the 1920s, nudity became widely practiced in many European countries such as Germany, France, Switzerland, and England [50]. Social nudity was seen as a philosophical, medical, and political movement which could remediate gender, racial inequalities, and social class [51].

The modern naturist movement in Europe (1890–1940) began as a reaction to aspects of industrialization and urbanization that were debilitating [52]. It was suggested that engaging in a naturist lifestyle was seen as a leisure activity, cultural practice, and a lifestyle [51, 53], which largely derived from the philosophy of naturism. The ideology behind naturism (social nudity) focuses on valuing the contact between body and nature [50]. The fundamental notion behind naturism is that there is a complex interaction between nature, human nature, natural body, and natural landscapes [54]; and nature and its elements are beneficial to humans [55].

The practice of engaging in naturism at designated beaches has been common practice [50]. One author suggests that naturist beaches are sacred places where the normal status quo is temporarily suspended due to clothing being reduced and allowing individuals to experience freedom from the social norms [56]. It has also been reported that it is common for homosexual men to be present on naturist sites (beaches) [51]. Adding that naturist sites allow homosexual naturists an opportunity to escape social norms and provide them with the opportunity to explore their sexual identity [57]. There is literature which also supports the conception that naturist sites offer both heterosexuals [58] and homosexuals the opportunity to engage in exhibitionism, voyeurism, and swinging [57, 59, 60, 61]. As such, not all individuals who engage in social nudity are true to the naturist philosophy [50] and might experience stigmatization for their engagement in behavior that does not fit under the naturist philosophy [62].

Several western societies continue to hold negative attitudes and beliefs about naturism, even though it is a commonly practiced behavior [50]. Some individuals still view social nudity as an offensive behavior [46], as members of society assume it involves eroticism [57]. Scholars go as far as to argue that “*public nudity commonly carries with it a level of social opprobrium, largely shaped by religious dogma, which tends to be articulated through expressions of disgust, disapproval, and suspicion*” [56, p.355]. As such, it is plausible to debate that attitudes towards naturism are influenced by religious factors. Religious, moralist and conservative perspectives lead to individuals labelling the behavior as sexually deviant, weird, creepy, senseless, depraved, immoral, indecent and those who identify as naturists as perverts and pedophiles [58, 62, 63].

However, definitions of naturism contest that practicing nudity in the presence of other individuals in public places is without any intention of sexual stimulation [64, 65]. Engaging in naturism may have political meanings [66], where the individuals participating in public nudity fail to identify as naturists due to the political message associated with the event [67]. Failure to differentiate between nudism and naturism has led to discussions in the literature [68]. Given that nudism is mostly referred to as an individual removing their clothes, many naturists do not fall under the label nudist and vice versa [46]. One distinction between nudism and naturism is that nudism is the simple act of not wearing clothing and therefore lacks the fundamental philosophy of naturism [69]. Naturism, however, first came about as a social movement [54] and is considered a leisure activity which is founded on the ideology that nature provides medicinal benefits to individuals [55]. As such, some of the existing literature fails to make the distinction between these concepts [69]. From a naturist perspective, the use of clothing divides individuals into grades, types, and categories (for example, normal, deviant, civilized, insane) in society [69, 70].

4. Misconceptions about naturism

This review has unearthed some misapprehensions about naturism. It has been argued in the literature that non-naturists who are referred to as the *textiles* in the naturist community have a big misconception of naturism and naturists [48]. According to others [50] this misconception partly stems from the Church considering nudity as something to be ashamed of and to feel guilty about. Others further suggest that social nudity across societies is both considered deviant, demeaning, criminal or transgressive and an exhilarating behavior at the same time [47]. As such, public attitudes towards naturists and the behavior of naturism range amongst suspicion, embarrassment, condemnation to hostility [69], which leads to those who identify as naturists to disguise their identity and engage in secrecy to protect themselves [48].

In one qualitative study exploring stigma towards tourists who attend a nude beach in Mexico, where participants were local to the nudist beach and interviews took place during a Nudist Festival [71]. The first section of this study focused on exploring the residents' perceptions of naturism and naturists. The second section gathered data regarding the residents' perceptions of the nude festival in the community, and the final section collected sociodemographic data. In the interview process, the locals reported their willingness in interacting with nude tourists at the beach and stated that nudism is part of everyday life, and it is considered as something normal and natural. It was further reported that due to the practice of nudism only taking place at the beach, the majority of locals did not experience any direct contact with nude tourists while engaging in the behavior. Interviews with participants on their views about nudism highlight that the locals have come to understand that nudism is not simply taking one's clothes off but, it is a way of life, expression of freedom, showing others who one really is and getting rid of taboos [71]. These interviews highlight the fact that being in interaction with groups of people who engage in a certain *deviant* behavior alters the perceptions of stigmatized individuals and the stigma itself [72, 73]. However, one should bear in mind that, up to a certain point, stigma is dependent on the territorial and situational performance of the deviant behavior. Not every individual within a society or community holds a negative perception towards what might be considered a deviant behavior, however, there are members within the community who still stigmatize those who engage in these behaviors. Thus, the extent to which stigma towards naturism exists for those who identify as naturists should be explored further to better understand the lived experience.

5. Naturism as trend growing overtime

Another theme that came out of conducting this search of the literature was an evident growth in naturist behavior. The earliest known naturist club in the world was founded by Charles Edward Gordon Crawford in 1891 in British India [74]. However, the club was active for only over a year and is not considered influential to later events regarding naturism. Another naturist club named as the Freilichtpark (meaning Free-Light Park) was opened by Paul Zimmerman in 1903, which was inspired by the book *The Cult of the Nude* published in 1900 by Heinrich Pudor. Pudor was a German sociologist, who was by some individuals referred to as the *father of nudism*. His book promoted naturism and led to his followers engaging in a naturist lifestyle, which included healthy diets and daily exercise [74].

Several naturist clubs were founded during the years leading up to World War II and several protests were organized to support the nudist movement (Black, 2004). At the same time, proponents of social nudity were being persecuted in different countries across the world (Canada, the Soviet Union, the United States and France). Two permanent naturist communities which are still currently active, were founded in the United States in 1932 (Sky Farm and Rock Lodge Club, New Jersey). At the same time, Germany, which is considered to be the birthplace of social nudity took a different stance and banned nudist organizations around 1933. However, these organizations were restructured as sports groups and therefore legalized [49].

In the United Kingdom, the first naturist organization was founded in the county of Essex in 1924. The club was named as the Moonella Group, and its members were carefully selected [75]. Its members each had a club name in order to keep their identities anonymous. Some of the group rules were making sure that the identity of the members was not revealed to others, that photographs were not taken without the committees' approval and the location of the club would not be revealed to others. These rules were similar in some of the naturist clubs that were founded later. In addition, the group had very strict rules regarding the communication amongst its members. For instance, its members were instructed on how to address each other in their letters regarding the use of club names, and signatures. The group also had strict rules regarding the wearing of sandals, headbands and prohibited the use of jewelry. Its members were encouraged to avoid complimenting others on their appearance [75].

Like the United Kingdom, individuals who engaged in social nudity in New Zealand used to be considered uncivilized and compared to indigenous people who were unclothed [76]. The naturist clubs that were founded in the 1950s and 1960s had strict rules similar to the United Kingdom. For instance, when single men expressed an interest in joining these clubs, they were greeted with suspicion. Additionally, if married men wanted to become club members, they needed their wives to sign a document allowing them to join the club. The consumption of alcohol was strictly prohibited and those who engaged in unacceptable behavior were ejected from clubs [76]. The president of the New Zealand Sunbathing Association supported the naturist movement in mid-1950s by involving the press to inform the general public regarding the philosophy of naturism, which led to a greater acceptance of the behavior. After gaining popularity and society adopting a more liberal perspective in the 1960s and 1970s, naturists ventured into public places such as beaches which led to a change in interpretation of the law and made it legal to engage in public social nudity in the 1980s [76].

In today's world, many naturist organizations around the world have their own rules and regulations regarding their members. For instance, the Australian Naturist Organization states that unmarried individuals are more than welcome to join as a member. However, they have strict rules regarding taking pictures and highlight that many members are mindful of their pictures taken while engaging in naturism. Hence, they require their members to ask for permission and photographers to have individuals sign a form prior to snapping shots [77].

Throughout the years, there have been many different organizations founded with the aim of supporting and normalizing naturism. One of the most well-known naturist organizations in the United Kingdom is the British Naturism (BN) which was founded in 1964. BN is an internationally recognized national organization and was formed by the merge of two separate organizations (British Sunbathing Society and the Federation of British Sun Clubs). Given that there are many naturist organizations worldwide, in 1953, the International Naturist Foundation (INF) was founded to bring worldwide naturists together. The INF today represents 36 different federations worldwide and has 14 official correspondents. Its aim is to represent the interests of naturists [78].

According to the INF, the total number of members across the world has now grown to more than 450000 individuals [78]. Even though there is detailed information regarding the different federations and correspondents in 50 countries, there are no statistics regarding the exact number of individuals who engage in naturist activities across the world. Individual websites of naturist federations do not always provide the exact number of members on their websites. Nevertheless, there are organizations that provide an estimate number of members. For instance, the Belgian Naturist Organization highlights that there are now over 8,000 individual members [78]. Additionally, The Irish Naturist Association reports that there are more than 200 members [78]. In research conducted by the Institut Français d'opinion publique [79] regarding the number of women who have previously engaged in naturist activities in the world, 8070 participants who were 18 years and older were recruited online. Participants were from European countries and North America. Their findings highlight that the highest number of females who previously engaged in naturism were from Spain (25%). The second highest country was Germany at 21%, followed by the Netherlands (13%), France (9%), United Kingdom and Italy (8%), United States and Canada (7%).

6. Attitudes towards naturism

Another key matter elicited from this review was that people hold a range of competing beliefs about naturism. According to one survey that aimed to explore people's attitudes towards naturism, over one million people living in the United Kingdom identified as naturists [80]. As reported in the briefing paper, participants were asked questions regarding their experience of engaging in unclothed activities, their attitudes towards encountering nudity, their attitudes towards naturists, public nudity, and the law and whether they self-identified as a naturist. Findings from this survey highlighted that 24% of respondents had previously engaged in skinny-dipping, 14% had sunbathed without a bathing suit, 11% had been on a naturist beach and 7% had visited a naturist site. When respondents were asked about their attitudes towards coming across an individual or group engaging in naturism, 78% reported that they would ignore them and carry on, 2% reported they would feel alarmed and keep away from them and 1% reported they would call the police due to experiencing feelings of distress and being frightened.

Whilst exploring attitudes towards naturists, 88% of respondents in the study reported that they would consider naturists harmless and 40% reported finding naturists as sensible. However, 7% of the respondents reported that they would find naturists disgusting and 2% would consider them to be criminals. When respondents were asked whether adult nudity should be legal or not, 69% reported that there should be designated areas declared as clothing optional. Additionally, 66% of the respondents highlighted that the behavior should be legal to engage in in the privacy of individuals' own properties and 35% reported that naturism could become legal in public swimming pools only at specific times. Interestingly, an online poll found that when buying a home next door to naturists, 50% of respondents

would have no concerns, 34% would be okay with it if they do not see their neighbors engaging in the behavior and 16% would avoid purchasing a home with naturist neighbors [80].

To update data on the attitudes towards naturism and the number of individuals who identify as naturists, Ipsos-Mori conducted a survey with a sample of 2033 participants aged 15 years and above. Their findings revealed an increase in the number of naturists in the UK. More specifically, around 3.7 million individuals (6% of the population) reported identifying as naturists. This survey highlighted that 82% of participants considered individuals who identify as naturists are harmless and 5% found naturists to be sensible. Conversely, 9% of the population reported naturism as disgusting and 1% of them thought it was illegal to engage in. In the most recent research regarding number of individuals who identify as naturists, conducted by Ipsos-Mori in 2022, 2249 individuals between the ages of 16 and 75 years were interviewed in the UK. Findings from the most recent poll suggest that 6.75 million individuals in the UK (equating to 14% of the population) identify as naturists [81].

Given these current statistics, it is evident that individuals are choosing to engage in naturist activities which leads to an increase in the number of those who identify as naturists. Moreover, these polls aimed to explore public perceptions towards naturism and suggest that there are negative opinions about naturism and naturists seen in the media which might impact public perceptions towards naturists and lead to stigmatizing views, discriminating behavior, and stereotyping those who identify as naturists.

7. Naturism as a positive behavior

Beyond the stigmatization of naturism, it has been suggested in the literature that social nudity not only brings medical, political, social, and psychological benefits to those who engage in it, but it also assists societies in weakening racial, class and gender divides [51]. There is some evidence in the existing literature that naturist activities can lead to improvements in self-esteem, body image, and overall life satisfaction [82]. In fact, in 19th century England, naked sunbathing was considered the norm and seen as therapeutic rather than pornographic [54]. The practice of social nudity in public places such as beaches was not only due to its medical benefits, but it also provided individuals with an opportunity to relax and socialize with like-minded people [58].

The concept of naturism has frequently been associated with sex and sexual activity [69]. However, the naturist movement highlights that the nonsexual aspect of nudity is one of the most important components of naturism [54]. Even though the etymology of nudity, nakedness and naturism is not related to sex, there is an evident and automatic link between them [83]. Settings where individuals engage in social nudity, such as nudist beaches have frequently been highlighted for the presence of sexual activity [47, 54, 57]. It is common knowledge that *sex sells*, which is possibly the reason why naturism regularly hits the tabloid press both in printed and social media. There are numerous television programs and documentaries on the air that highlight the act of engaging in naturism as a positive thing. A recent series that features naturism is Channel 4's *Naked Education*, which encourages individuals to celebrate diversity and body positivity. It is promoted as being about body positivity and attempts to normalize all body types, highlight differences, and to break down stereotypes. The launch of *Naked Education* sparked fury due to its content showing adults who are fully unclothed in front of children aged 14 to 16 years. The children can ask questions about bodies and engage in conversation. On the social media platform, Twitter™, some viewers have expressed their opinions towards the show by highlighting it as "*filthy*", questioning "*why is this being allowed?*", and stating that "*others do not need to see strangers fully naked to be educated on the body.*" Another Channel 4 series *The Naked Attraction* involves singletons being invited to choose potential dates based on the presentation of their naked bodies. However, the reactions from viewers of this show were similarly controversial and this signifies an existing stigma towards individuals who engage in naturist behavior, albeit anecdotally.

8. Conclusion

Overall, the present review of the published literature on the complex and multifaceted link between stigma and naturism has identified statistics that indicate that the number of individuals who engage in naturism is on the increase. Furthermore, social media accounts reveal that negative perceptions do exist towards naturists and naturism, and these still very much exist in society. Moreover, despite naturism being a legal activity in many countries, naturists may be experiencing some negative consequences associated with their naturist identity in society and the workplace. Despite identifying these common factors, this review has ultimately exposed a stark shortage of rigorous research on this topic and as such, it is imperative that researchers work to conduct stringent empirical studies to better our understanding of societies' attitudes and beliefs towards naturism. This is important to first provide a comprehensive appreciation of

this growing behavior that can then be used to develop evidence-based initiatives that aim to tackle stigma towards the individuals and societies who choose to engage in naturism.

Compliance with ethical standards

Disclosure of conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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