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Life comes first, but lifestyle also matters: aesthetic responses to pandemic angst

Análise Social, LVIII (1.º), 2023 (n.º 246), pp. 172-191
https://doi.org/10.31447/AS00032573.2023246.09
ISSN ONLINE 2182-2999

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Análise Social, 246, LVIII (1.º), 2023, 172-191

Life comes first, but lifestyle also matters: aesthetic responses to pandemic angst. The beauty industry has largely been considered recession-proof. However, lockdowns dictated by the pandemic have brought significant changes to our self-care routines. Is aesthetic surgery perceived by consumers as a strategy to cope with anxiety, enhance lives inside and out, and increase dignity, happiness, and self-esteem? How do we want to look aesthetically after social distancing measures have been lifted? Are the specific conditions of the present moment linked to the prospect of increased competition? Personal anxieties, motives and desires resist simple quantification and are often dismissed or overlooked in economic literature. Ethnography provides a possibility for a different approach, creating a better understanding of consumers' emotional and behavioural responses to the Coronavirus outbreak.
KEYWORDS: Covid-19; beauty; self-care; lifestyle.

A vida vem primeiro, mas o estilo de vida também interessa: respostas estéticas à angústia pandémica. A indústria da beleza tem sido considerada à prova de recessão. Contudo, os confinamentos estabelecidos pela pandemia trouxeram alterações significativas às nossas rotinas de autocuidado. Será a cirurgia estética entendida pelos consumidores como uma estratégia para lidar com a ansiedade, melhorar as nossas vidas por dentro e por fora e aumentar a dignidade, felicidade e autoestima? Qual é a aparência estética que queremos ter após terem sido levantadas as medidas de distanciamento? As condições específicas do momento presente estão ligadas à perspetiva de uma competição acrescida? As ansiedades pessoais, motivos e desejos resistem à quantificação simples e são frequentemente descartadas ou ignoradas na literatura económica. A etnografia fornece a possibilidade de uma abordagem diferente, permitindo uma melhor compreensão das respostas emocionais e comportamentais dos consumidores ao surto do Coronavírus.
PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Covid-19; beleza; autocuidado; estilo de vida.

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INTRODUCTION

The Covid-19 pandemic was responsible for altering every aspect of our lives in an unprecedented manner, defining a profound disruption between the "before" and the "after." It has also posed itself has an unprecedented challenge to the international scientific community.

The global sanitary emergency confronts us with what Ulrich Beck (2017) has called "the metamorphosis of the world": a radical life change, which forces us to reconfigure completely our own culturally embedded self-care routines. While anthropologists responded to the crisis by producing uniquely valuable contributions addressing the medical implications and the socioeconomic complexities of the pandemic (Appadurai, 2020; Higgins, Martin and Vesperi, 2020; Enguita-Fernàndez et al., 2020; Hardy, 2020; Manderson and Levine, 2020; Team and Manderson; 2020), empirically grounded qualitative research on the reformulation of people's intimate bodily processes and daily self-care practices during Covid-19 lockdowns and in the post-pandemic remains scarce.

From an ethnographic perspective, conducting in-depth interviews with middle-class Portuguese women living in Lisbon, this article is broadly concerned with how individuals have been (re)assessing the importance of beauty, aesthetic procedures and self-care practices for their well-being and life satisfaction, delivering massive changes to their self-care routines, in the light of the Covid-19 sanitary crisis. My goal is to take a critical perspective towards "appearance enhancing" practices and "beauty labour" during the pandemic, asking questions such as: how is the Covid-19 pandemic changing our relationship with aesthetics and self-care? Is aesthetic surgery perceived by consumers as a strategy to cope with anxiety? How do we want to look aesthetically beyond the lockdown? While it is vital to surviving today, are people already

investing in their appearance to increase their opportunities in the post-Covid "back to reality"?

BEAUTY MATTERS

Doing scientific research on beauty is neither simple nor superficial. Too often beauty is dismissed in the academic field as a frivolous matter: a not serious enough subject for academic investigation. The studies I have conducted on beauty in recent years show that it does in fact matter to individuals, real women and also men (Jarrín and Pussetti, 2021; Pussetti, Rohden and Roca, 2021; Pussetti, Brandão and Rohden, 2020; Pussetti 2021). It matters to people because it constructs our identity and defines our self-perception, shapes our social opportunities, and structures our daily practices, providing personal and collective meanings. It matters because it is at the same time a coveted ideal and a moral obligation and we spend a lot of time and money to achieve it. It matters because the beauty industry is one of the most profitable in the world and the hegemonic ideals it proposes are experienced not as "obligations" but as aspirations, desires, and values. It matters because the ideal of beauty confirms an aesthetic hierarchy in which some bodies matter more than others, and attractive bodies are produced, regulated, and disciplined based on unequal power relations.

In the last two decades, the concepts of "well-being" and "good life" have gained relevance as key categories in the fields of sociology, economics and development studies, producing a substantial body of quantitative research (Weimann et al., 2016; Gough et al. 2007; Ra, 2011). Anthropologists have only recently started paying attention to culturally embedded notions of "well-being" and "good life" (Corsín Jiménez, 2008; Jiménez, 2008; Mathews and Izquierdo 2009; Jackson, 2011; Fischer, 2014; Mattingly, 2014) using ethnographic methods in order to achieve an empirically grounded understanding of the different imaginaries, aspirations, choices and notions of value that guide people in their quest for a pleasant life.

This article is critically inspired by anthropological research on how people value their happiness and life satisfaction (Walker and Kavedžija, 2015; Kavedžija and Walker, 2016), understand the good, define its proper pursuit (Robbins, 2013), and make their decisions in terms of individual freedom and social responsibility in times of crisis (Kleinman, 2007; Sykes, 2009; Laidlaw, 2013; Mattingly, 2014; Heywood, 2015; Lambek, 2010; Lambek, 2015). While maintaining a close dialogue with this body of literature, the article offers an empirically grounded study of urban middle-class Portuguese women's "beauty work" after the outbreak of the pandemic.

The pandemic and the resulting containment measures caused an economic and social crisis, affecting all the core capabilities outlined by Nussbaum (2011), including the possibility to go freely to the spa or the hairdresser, the gym, the beauty parlour or even the freedom of not having to wear a facemask (Biggeri, 2020; Manley, 2020). The transformation of everyday activities brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic has altered the experience, perception and understanding of the gendered body. The pandemic has forced people to spend more time with themselves than ever, which forced them to reconfigure their priorities and needs, to reshape their self-care rituals and subjective ideals of well-being.

Living through a global pandemic has caused dramatic shifts in our everyday routines, including beauty habits and even our bodily self-perception. Many of the locations, which represent and shape the "beauty work" of the gendered body – from the gym, the hairdresser, the beauty salon, or the aesthetic clinic – were temporarily closed, while other self-care practices have become more central. If some bodily rituals were suspended, other aesthetic practices and processes were intensified. How is beauty important during the pandemic? How are personal care and beauty categories performing during the lockdown? How is Covid-19 changing our relationship with aesthetics?

METHODOLOGY

To look into these aspects, I present the results of the fieldwork I have been conducting in the last eighteen months mostly with white Portuguese middle-class women living in Lisbon, who come from privileged backgrounds, and whose ages range from thirty to sixty years old. The focus of my investigation is their aesthetic practices during the pandemic and their lifestyle aspirations.

I have carried out a multimethod research strategy employing netnography and in-depth ethnography. I have used netnography (Kozinets, 2010) or virtual ethnography (Hine, 2000), qualitative research methods – participating in different virtual social spheres, such as e-groups, chat rooms and online forums dedicated to beauty and self-care, considering that several offline and private practices have a clear correspondence online (and vice versa) and that during the lockdown e-communities were vital for developing important social ties between users, forming a system of relationships similar to ties of friendship. I have also adopted an Internet-based survey focused on aesthetic concerns and aspirations and concrete cosmetic practices during the lockdown, relying as much as possible on "face-saving" techniques, to obtain "guilt-free" answers and avoid social desirability biases. Questions addressed changes in beauty habits and self-care practices during the Covid-19 pandemic.

An online survey was completed by 112 women living in Lisbon during the first lockdown of 2021, promulgated by the Portuguese Government on 14th January after Covid-19 cases soared due to Christmas and New Year's permitted social gatherings. Given lockdown limitations, the web survey offered itself as the best tool to carry out a "remote" questionnaire. The survey was anonymous, and participants gave their consent online.

The actual fieldwork relied on classical in-depth ethnography – participant observation, informal and semi-structured interviews ($N \geq 30$ determined by theoretical saturation, with participants identified because of participant observation and via a snowballing sampling). Due to public health concerns, I had to remotely interview – by telephone or by Zoom, Teams or Skype – 12 beauty professionals, 4 health-care professionals and 2 investors who opened new cosmetic clinics in Lisbon during the pandemic to respond to increasing demands from the public and clients.

Occasionally accompanied by a student research assistant, I have undertaken participant observation in private aesthetic clinics, where I interviewed 33 middle-class Lisbon resident women and accompanied them in their aesthetic transformations during the lockdown periods. I formally interviewed the participants using an open-ended interview script and spent some time with them engaging in informal conversations and observations in various settings, including hairdressers and beauticians. Interview questions explored a range of issues related to experiences of ageing and losing precious time during the lockdowns, including feelings about changes in bodies and appearance due to the restriction of staying at home, values surrounding beauty and youth, whether they believed beauty and ageing are under their control, aspirations and fears regarding the post-lockdown prospect of increased competition in all spheres of social life, and what their own visions of successful self-care and beauty strategies to survive confinement. Their goals were clear: to succeed at the counterattack phase and be ready to win the post-Covid claim.

Although aesthetic concerns are also important for male subjects, I mainly conducted interviews with women. First, the regular unobtrusive contact with women who are in most cases part of my friend circle, but also colleagues or acquaintances, allowed me to employ intimate ties already built to capture a wide range of perspectives, to pinpoint the different kinds of experiences and reveal contradictory behaviours between individualistic attitudes and social responsibility. Second, in comparison to women, the heterosexual men with whom I talked to did not consider beauty and self-care habits so significantly important for their sense of self, identity, and heterosexual desirability. Although today it is expected for men to take care of their appearance, there is a clear limit to how much work they should put into their body projects and to

the level of concern or attention that it is legitimate to devote to beauty work (Gimlin, 2002; Berkowitz, 2017; Cameron et al., 2019). While fitness regimes, dietary control, the usage of hair care, shaving or skin moisturizing products and the purchase of consumer goods including clothing, accessories and cosmetics were reported without shame, the issue of beauty rituals remains an intimate topic, very difficult to explore, especially for heterosexual men. Topics such as hair transplants, masculinization fillers to build a "powerful profile" as an indicator of leadership competence, or surgical implants to redefine the chin and to build a strong "superhero" jawline to achieve a more masculine look are in my opinion incredibly interesting. Nevertheless, in my interviews, I noticed an inclination of heterosexual men to value professional success, sport, or sexual performance rather than beauty regarding their social construction of the perception of the self. Conversation topics such as cosmetic surgeries, fillers, implants, liposuction, botox injections, body dysmorphia, diets or eating disorders, are not yet seen as socially acceptable or interesting for the majority of heterosexual men (Kaminski et al. 2005; Peplau et al. 2009). The perception of beauty as an explicitly gendered phenomenon – within a larger system of gender inequality in which women are especially impacted by the pressure for body perfection – and the discomfort of heterosexual men in answering questions about beauty partially justifies the clear invisibility of the male gender in most studies on aesthetics and beauty.

Most of the interviews were audio recorded and transcribed and then analysed to uncover recurring as well as unique or divergent themes and ideas. Participation in the study was entirely voluntary and all participants were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time without consequences. All participants received a clearly formulated document of informed consent in advance, describing the aims, methods and implications of the research, the nature of their participation, its potential risks and benefits as well as their right to confidentiality, anonymity, and reciprocity. The interviews were then accurately transcribed without omissions or fraudulent interpretations.

AESTHETIC RESPONSES TO PANDEMIC ANGST

Although it may seem shallow or frivolous during a so hard health and economic crisis to explore experiences of self-care and beauty work, the increased focus on appearance in stressful circumstances reveals a lot about coping strategies and ways of reacting to events beyond our control. In this climate of uncertainty and anxiety, beauty remains one aspect of our lives that we can still exert some control over, and self-care choices and attitudes can be read as indicators of resilience or resistance.

Carrying out ethnographic research on self-care strategies for coping with pandemic angsts does not mean underestimating the dramatic worldwide consequences of this sanitarian crisis. The impact of the pandemic has never been underestimated by my interviewees: most of my research participants know someone who suffered from this horrific virus or who has lost loved ones and all confessed deep concern and anxiety for the future. If during the first months of fieldwork in 2020, I was able to notice a certain resistance in answering questions about beauty and the tendency to moralise and judge negatively people who resorted to aesthetic surgery in a time of global crisis, the discourse quickly changed. Already at the end of the second month of confinement, in April of 2020, beauty products and practices as well as concerns about appearance, weight gain and ageing in anticipation of the return to social life in the post-Covid era became salient topics to talk about, ask for advice, and to invest time, energy, and money.

As stated earlier, the beauty industry has largely been considered recession-proof, a phenomenon called the "lipstick effect" (Hill et al., 2012; Ekaterina and McKenzie, 2016; Palumbo et al., 2017). Several studies indicate that in the face of moments of great social and economic crisis, the desire and purchase of items that improve appearance increase. Like the "lipstick effect," we are using aesthetic dermatology treatments to enhance natural beauty to get a little pick-me-up during these difficult times. Consumption habits tend to witness drastic changes that reveal plenty about each crisis. Studies from behavioural economics and evolutionary psychology suggest that in times of economic downturn, consumers will be more willing to buy luxury beauty products to enhance their appearance. The project "EXCEL. The Pursuit of Excellence. Biotechnologies, enhancement and body capital in Portugal" that I coordinate at the Institute of Social Sciences of the University of Lisbon focuses precisely on the relationship between the 2008 financial crisis in Portugal and the increase of investment on aesthetic practices during and after the years of the recession.

I was working on the effects of this economic recession on the increase in the consumption of cosmetic products and aesthetic procedures in Portugal, when suddenly we entered another global, sanitary, and political crisis: the Covid-19 pandemic. Could this new – sanitarian, economical and political – calamity have a different outcome?

The question is relevant for several reasons. First, the sector of aesthetics has distinguished itself for its exceptionality in lockdown policies. On March 18, 2020, the Portuguese national government declared the first state of emergency; on April 1st the second one and the 18th the third lockdown was announced. During these months, the quarantine was extended to the whole national territory, restricting the movement of people, suspending all pub-

lic events, and closing schools, universities, and all non-essential businesses and industries. A gradual reopening of little commercial and public activities started on May 4th 2020 and hairdressers, beauticians and barbers reopened their doors.

Not only cosmetics sectors such as hairdressers and beauty salons were the first commercial activities to reopen after the lockdowns in Portugal, but – and even more surprisingly – cosmetic medicine clinics did not close their doors during confinement and the demand for aesthetic interventions drastically grew. Suddenly, a race to the hairdressers started and the beauty salons and aesthetic clinics were without vacancies for months. The consumption of aesthetic and well-being products also increased during lockdowns: aesthetic medicine, hairdresser and beauty salons sectors, which not by chance were always the first to open their doors after the lockdowns, many clinics never closed their doors and the demand for interventions such as Botox or fillers for facial rejuvenation increased.

The consumption of aesthetic and well-being products not only increased when the aesthetic clinics and beauty salons reopened their doors but also remained high during lockdowns, with consumers turning to all sorts of homecare products to keep their beauty rituals running. Many clinics never closed their doors and the demand for interventions such as Botox or fillers for facial rejuvenation boosted. In fact, in Lisbon, we could witness the opening of at least three new aesthetic surgery centres during the pandemic in order to respond to customer demands. Surgeons and healthcare practitioners were engaged in cosmetic surgery in private aesthetic clinics, at the same time as public hospitals succumbed to the pressure of patients in need of intensive care. All the major daily newspapers in Portugal reported that the Coronavirus pandemic caused a boom in cosmetic procedures and the trend continues as the pandemic continues.

If the urgency to carry out routine beauty treatments – such as haircuts or hair colouring services, body hair removal, manicures and pedicures with gel nail polish – justified the early reopening of hair and nail salons, barbershops and aestheticians, at the same time a large underground market of aesthetic services at home spiked under Covid-19 restrictions, despite it being against the rules. Many hair stylists, barbers and beauticians continued secretly working during the pandemic: with a short search in social media (Instagram or Facebook) I could easily find hairdressers, manicurists, aestheticians, and cosmetic doctors willing to get you botox at home, apart from other aesthetic services.

In a moment of global sanitarian crisis, in which the most important should be to survive, the desire and purchase of luxury cosmetic items or aesthetic

interventions increased. With people staying indoors, scared, and confused, covering their faces with masks, it was conceivable that this would lead to a decreased desire for facial cosmetic procedures, but the opposite has occurred. The lockdown does not free women from the constraints of beauty norms: gendered consumer lifestyle advice has continued to proliferate, emphasising imperatives to stay productive, be healthy and active, and practice self-care at home. Maybe, it even added additional pressure to their already concerns over ageing and staying fit: when the pandemic ended, who would dare show their bare faces for months hidden behind curtains and Zoom filters?

My interviews indicate that women activated various adaptation strategies in response to the crisis centred on beauty products, practices, and procedures with possible significant effects on their future lifestyles and well-being. From the collected data, three relevant issues emerged: i) beauty as an emergency ritual; ii) beauty as self-care; and iii) beauty as a (post-Covid) strategy. For each theme, I will report first a few fragments of my interviews, which were useful for the final analysis.

BEAUTY AS AN EMERGENCY RITUAL

> I couldn't help thinking about all those deaths, which made my anxiety worse because it's not a scenario I can control. During the lockdown I started to dedicate more time to myself. The feeling in the first months was of the end of the world, a matter of life or death… I started meditating, doing yoga and mindfulness online classes. I started taking care of my body with a series of daily rituals, such as taking immersion baths with salts and a few drops of lavender oil, to do hydrating face masks, hair masks, body scrub and so on […]. Although at first I struggled to relax, after a few weeks the relaxing bath and the beauty masks had become a daily necessity. [Sandra, 32 years old]

> During the first few week,s I spent the day in my pyjamas, doing nothing. Suddenly, I realized it couldn't be that way. So, I organized the spaces in the house in a much more ordered way. A space to work, one to meditate or to pray, one to exercise… the bathroom has become my oasis… scented candles, candles, music, products for my beauty rituals and for the bathroom. It's a kind of organised life-at-home: I am so focused on the task at hand that I had no time to focus on any anxiety-inducing thought. The world around me could be on fire, but my little bubble is safe. The hours I dedicated to myself each day let me escape from the chaos. [Luisa, 43 years old]

> The current worldwide crisis has disrupted normal routines. My skin-care routine isn't just about my body. With so many things out of control, to be able to dedicate time to a beauty routine is a gift. It's something I can do for myself. It's one thing where I still have a

choice. When I start my routine each morning, I feel the power of directing my own actions and making my own decisions. I focus my mind every time I engage in methodical self--care. The reflection of who I might become in the mirror each morning is something I can choose. My routine matters more to me now than ever, because I can no longer rely on what used to work. [Isabel, 42 years old]

In a time of crisis, cultivating the body can be a lifesaver. When all my normal schedules became hectic, my quarantine self-care routine turned to a chance of self-nourishment, to maintain a sense of time and order, to recover a minimum of normalcy. In chaotic times, I turn to the same few steps: cleanse, cry, moisturize (LOL). I started running, exercising, and cooking much more carefully and healthily. I bought huge beauty products online, hair masks, body oils, essential oils for aromatherapy and even a very expensive machine to thoroughly clean the skin as in a professional treatment. I organised my day methodically. There is a time for running, for my beauty ritual, for reading, for cooking. Following a routine is essential: the reward is that I seem to regain control, I feel a little more confident and a little more optimistic. [Joana, 39 years old]

Manicure, pedicure, hair cutting and dyeing, waxing… are routines that mark the time. The client comes to this space and dedicates time to her body. During the pandemic we have lost the boundaries of time and of the body: shapeless and scraggy-haired hair, body hair to tame, horrible nails, dreadful moustache. I continued to work at my clients' homes, not only because I needed the money but especially because they needed me. [Dani, 39 years old, hairdresser and beautician]

The coronavirus made evident that we need rituals and routines during crises, but why do we need them? The anthropology of disasters offers a key to understand this conundrum (Duiveman, 2019; Gugg; 2018). Every disaster has an all-encompassing character that, in addition to pain and loss, causes spatial, temporal, moral and social disorder. In emergency situations, daily commitments – such as school and work – are profoundly altered, time expands, relational life reduces to a minimum, leisure activities are interrupted, and eating and consumption habits undergo a sudden and drastic revision. We are living in times of existential anguish, isolation, economic insecurity, prolonged uncertainty, grief, and fear. Creating routines, rituals, and boundaries allow people to reduce the sense of strangeness, to separate the different activities, the different roles and responsibilities that we inhabit and to maintain a sense of time. Routines, rituals, and boundaries create delineation, structure, and borders, which are necessary when our normal rhythms are disrupted or challenged. A ritualised routine is a project of order and reorganisation, a form to control the chaos, and dominate the indomitable and it provides us with a sense

of security, control, and stability. The ritualised routines associated with the pandemic, either secular or devotional, individual or collective – such as the songs and applauses at the same hour from the balconies, the rainbows, and so on – are increasingly evident and part of our daily life. My interviewees refer to their beauty routines as ways of containing the chaos, of creating an illusion of calm, a safe space to dominate anxiety and anguish.

BEAUTY AS SELF-CARE

> When I care for myself it's a moment for me to slow the hell down and breathe, feel grateful for these luxuries, and reflect on my ability to give myself comfort. My quarantine beauty routine is the ultimate form of self-care. [Luisa, 41 years old]

> During the Covid-19 pandemic, I have spent more time at home and changed my behaviour: focusing more on my well-being, on the body/soul harmony, combining healthy beauty and self-care benefits. I bought online vegan skincare products, enriched with superfood ingredients. And I have started a vegan diet with detox and superfood nutrients too. I'm much more careful about what "safe and clean beauty" and "vegan, organic, green and eco-friendly products' are. Beauty is physical, mental and emotional self-caring, but we do also have to care for the environment. [Antónia, 54 years old]

> To give myself only organic products is the step I take to express self-love and self-respect for myself and for the planet, and that's why I do it. I invest more money into better products to take care of myself. In my experience, just knowing that your beauty ritual is a health ritual is stress relieving. [Maria João, 41 years old]

> We are guilty of what is happening to our planet: climate change, epidemics… and now the pandemic. Our consumer habits have changed the planet very significantly. Covid-19 teaches us that we need to start changing our daily choices. I use only cruelty-free and vegan beauty products. It's so much better for my skin and the environment. Taking care of myself is essential to being able to assist others and to protect the planet. [Daniela, 31 years old]

> Beauty is to take care of yourself, to help preserve and improve your own health, well-being, and happiness. I changed my eating habits to avoid the "covebesity" effect. You know… limited access to gyms, comfort eating due to boredom… Skin too has not escaped unscathed; I think it is due to the mask. I started having acne and I saw my skin losing its glow, maybe for less sunlight exposure due to staying at home all the time. I have invested in great products to take care of myself: to lift my face and my mood. [Vera, 54 years old]

Due to the pandemic, consumers are changing quickly the way they buy and use cosmetics and personal care products: they talk about beauty therapy, self-care routines, health and natural products, preferring to buy products labelled "cruelty-free," "clean" "hypoallergenic," "non-toxic," "organic," "paraben-free," and "natural." Consumers pay close attention to "sustainability," which is mainly out of their health concern, and want to know more about key ingredients. For instance, they look at the percentage of vitamin C or hyaluronic acid when they read these products' labels. These commodities are responsible for giving consumers a sense of protection and "self-care" while at home. As the day is punctuated by healthy beauty regimens, it gives them a sense of control over the chaos outside. Caring for appearance merges with the concern for our own health and the health of the planet. Daily outdoor physical activity, like walking, running, or hiking was allowed and encouraged during the lockdowns, to reduce people's anxiety and sadness during the confinement. The Portuguese Prime Minister even encouraged its people to invest in "hygienic walks," for the sake of their minds and bodies.

During the pandemic, demand for natural and organic products in Lisbon was on the rise. On the one hand, more time at home resulted in an increase in cooking, mostly healthy meals to counterbalance the need for "comfort food". On the other hand, the concern for the impact of the Covid-19 lockdown on body weight forced changes in dietary habits with an increasing demand for fresh products, which were also difficult to buy from supermarkets for some time. Confinements were responsible for having people invest in new "mindfulness" and relaxing rituals such as bread baking; for knowing new urban circuits of small producers and distributors of food baskets and new markets of small local farmers selling healthier and nutritious local products (Catela, 2021).

The importance of the dominant narrative of personal self-care increased during the Covid-19 pandemic. Self-care books, online messaging and public campaigns during the pandemic are burgeoning in Portugal, thus emphasizing the importance of self-care as a personal goal and individual responsibility. Imperatives towards self-care and well-being practices – such as eating healthy food, practising yoga, meditation and exercising – have strengthened during lockdowns, inciting people to adopt new lifestyle habits. The key ideology is that we each have a personal responsibility to stay fit, healthy, and active. Self-care is self-preservation and a strong immune system is better prepared to fight the virus: it allows you to rejuvenate and reduce stress, giving your body time to rest, reset, and rejuvenate. During lockdowns, taking care of ourselves was morally mandatory, and so was staying active, doing productive things, taking care of our appearance, eating well, and exercising. The underlying issue of all these arguments is the *ethos* of self-care as individual responsibility and moral

project: a priority in these difficult times to maintain our physical and mental balance. Contemporary discourse about self-care does not simply materialise from biopolitical and medical discourses; rather, ethnographic fieldwork helps us to unveil the intertwining of biopolitical governance, medicine, meanings, values, moral economies, personal desires and lived individual experiences of a self-centred lifestyle exemplified by the iconic slogan/mantra made popular my L'Oreal: "because you're worth it" (Pussetti, 2021).

BEAUTY AS A (POST-COVID) STRATEGY

I feel during this pandemic I'm getting a chance to perform cosmetic procedures I've never used due to not having the time. [Cristina, 58 years old]

I've felt a sense of increased freedom during the lockdown, the possibility of working at home, not having outdoor social obligations… this freedom has reaffirmed my desire to undergo cosmetic treatments. The flexibility of working from home can aid my post-procedure downtime and enable a discreet recovery. It was also a plus to have to wear a mask since it hid the post-treatment effects of my Russian lip filler. And my husband pampered me at home during the recovery. [Verónica, 38 years old]

I want to emerge from lockdown a "better" version of myself. After this terrible year, I feel like I deserve a reward. I don't want to look different, just better. Why not use this time to work on myself? [Luisa, 41 years old]

When I invest my money in cosmetic surgery or in any other treatment that improves myself, it's a boost of self-confidence. It is like receiving a gift. In some ways, it is how I show myself that I am the single most important thing in the world. After all, who am I doing this for anyway? [Sara, 41 years old]

I belong to that minority of lucky people who have not lost their jobs. For me, the lockdown meant saving money. I have had an actual increase in disposable income as I have no longer travelled, gone out for dinner, or done other any recreational activities. Now, it is time to invest in myself. [Catarina, 48 years old]

Even the most fortunate people… they've all lost some level of control over their lives, and one way of addressing that is by finding something to master. That could mean learning a new language, or it could mean getting a cosmetic procedure… In my case, there was no way I could have fit two or four weeks of recovery into my schedule, given the hands-on nature of my work. Before, I would have had to take time off from my job. Now it's like, I'm not going to my office anyway. [Catarina]

Feeling as though you do not look like you anymore can be stressful and destabilising, even if it is a matter of life and death. The quarantine has clearly jump-started a trend of shame-free, self-inspired beauty aspirations, which is always meant for achieving the best possible outcome. Everyone apparently wants to get back to normal post-lockdown life in great shape, even if it means "going under the knife." Social pressure to emerge from the pandemic as a better version of oneself appears to have caused a stigmatic result on those who have not used the time for self-improvement or who do not have the money to pay for the treatments. With amped-up betterment advertisements on social media about getting in shape, staying productive and starting a side business, we feel the pressure to emerge from lockdown as "better" versions of ourselves, even if it involves resorting to drastic measures to keep up with these goals.

We ask ourselves: are the specific conditions of the present moment linked to the prospect of increased competition? Are people investing in their appearance to increase their social and professional opportunities in the economic meltdown triggered by the Coronavirus outbreak? While it is vital to surviving today, are people already positioning themselves to win the counterattack phase and be ready to win the post-Covid claim? Investing in their appearance is a common strategy to promote personal competitiveness according to the logic of excellence, in a drastic competition for "likes" and "follows" that asks for a domesticated, unblemished body always ready for the camera. Beauty services seem to be offering exactly what so many people have been craving after a year of self-abnegation: a first taste of post-pandemic comfort and a modicum of control over how they enter the future.

> I was like, oh my God, they'll all be looking at my face. The pandemic is ruining my body. [Cristina, 58 years old]

> I thought, "oh, maybe I need to do something to my lip lines". I was looking at them going, "they're way deeper than I thought, I look really grumpy". [Paula, 44 years old]

> For a photo, you make the nicest expression you can, and you don't move. But on Zoom, you're seeing yourself talk – that really shows up all your face lines. And it seems to me that my face is asymmetrical. That's not what I look like in my selfies. I prefer to put the camera off, using a good-looking selfie with my identification. [Maria, 49 years old]

> You're seeing yourself express – that really shows up a frown line. I think it's the fact we're caught unaware… you catch a look at yourself on Zoom and think, "god, is that how stern I look?" [Maria, 38 years old]

Many authors refer to "Snapchat dysmorphia", "Selfie dysmorphia" and "Zoom dysphoria" as subtypes of body dysmorphic disorders, due to the use of beauty filters in social media platforms such as Instagram, Snapchat or Facebook that affect our perceptions of self and beauty (Youn, 2019; Eshiet, 2020; Tremblay, Tremblay and Poirier, 2021). Recent articles are revealing that social media are becoming a prominent part of the plastic surgeon-patient relationship: patients bring filtered selfies to their plastic surgery consultation as a way to communicate expectations to their doctors (Vashi 2016; Ramphul and Mejias 2018; Wang et al. 2020). These dysphorias can be triggered by excessive staring and self-reflecting on distorted images of ourselves.

The contribution of these works lies in their investigation of how the use of filtered images and photo editing has led to a new trend of dissatisfaction with appearance and an increase in demand for plastic surgery. My research rather reflects on the relationship between the increased use of social media during the pandemic and the rise of new concerns with appearance and bodily imperfections (Gasteratos et al., 2021; Rice et al., 2020, 2021; Pino, 2022).

Before the coronavirus pandemic, if someone had told me that spending hours on Zoom and Skype every day or having all our social interactions in social media would spark cosmetic surgery trends, I probably would have thought they were referencing another dystopic episode from the show Black Mirror. While Covid-19 has revolutionised how we interact, humans continue to be inherently social beings. We crave human interaction. But whilst in normal times during face-to-face meetings, one would focus on others, during lockdown – due to the digital reality we have had to adapt to – we've been forced to focus on ourselves. Multiple aesthetic and cosmetic surgeons I have spoken to over the last three months tell me they are surprised to hear people bringing up Zoom during their consultations. It is not only a "Zoom dysmorphia" phenomenon: the demand for cosmetic procedures is linked, in part, to the rise of posting "selfies" on social media platforms such as Snapchat, Tik-Tok, Facebook and Instagram. New patients are queuing to get their skin to glow in real life to match the filtered digital lens they have been using over the past four months. Certain injectable and aesthetic treatments, such as the *Zoom-ready cosmetic procedures*, the *Zoom Doom Injectables* or the *glammy insta-filler* are now trending because of how we look in an itty-bitty square whilst working from our living rooms. Botox and skin lasers might be most readily associated with a particular type of urban elite, but beauty services have a very wide range of prices, and they attract all kinds of customers.

In zoom meetings, I focus on how I look, I compare myself to the images of other women – who at that moment are not quite real people, but images

in squares – and I worry about ageing or dark circles, for example. From a reflective or self-ethnographic point of view, the incredible time I spent using video conferencing tools has heightened the awareness of my appearance, and I admit I have created aspirations for aesthetic improvement.

CONCLUSIONS

My research, mainly based on in-depth interviews with middle-class women living in the Lisbon urban area, shows beyond doubt that during the pandemic the consumption of cosmetic products and treatments has increased dramatically. How we shape and maintain our appearance is a social task – our bodies communicate on our behalf and how we want to be perceived. Having people anticipating a return to the physical world, being able to take some claim on how they will do it is comforting, after almost two years in which any individual controlled so little of their own fate. My research highlights that the need to improve one's appearance and to practice self–care is linked to the necessity to perceive a sense of control and normality in a time of vital crisis. The focus of "beauty" has shifted a few inches deeper than just surface level, becoming a means of creating protection, solace, and care. At the same time, during the Covid-19 pandemic, we were bombarded on social media with messages and discourses of positivity, hope, and resilience, urging us not to use covid as an excuse for not taking care of ourselves. These moralising exhortations to positivity – such as "stay positive," "love your body," "keep calm," "be your best self," "take care of yourself" because "you deserve it," "you are worth it" – have proliferated significantly and taken on a new intensity in response to the multiple crises associated with the pandemic. These moral imperatives of self-care, because "you deserve," are associated with a multiplicity of practices, products and techniques designed for self-improvement, and are disproportionately addressed to women. In other articles, I have pointed out how the beauty and self-care industry, with their promise of being "better," are deeply based on a perception of femininity as a problematic object in need of change (Riley et al., 2019). The female body is always problematised, represented as a malleable entity that can be shaped and perfected by the discipline and hard work of its owner (Pussetti, 2021). The pandemic, among many other things, has also revealed a veritable epidemic of problematic personal and social issues tied to our obsession with appearance. I am not arguing that we are superficial people. In fact, there is nothing superficial about body appearance or beauty, and that is why they matter. The body carries with it a dense history of meanings regarding race, class, gender, sexuality, disability, and age.

In times of global pandemic beauty labour and self-care interpellations to women flourish, shifting the focus of attention to the individual body and deflecting it from broader structural questions, exacerbated by the global health crisis. Thus, seemingly benign and often undoubtedly well-meaning messages of self-confidence, valorisation and improvement during the pandemic work to buttress a neoliberal imaginary of independence, choice, and self-responsibility, persistent and completely blind to social inequalities.

The technologies of self-improvement in our contemporary era are, using Donna Haraway's (1997, p. 7) words, "knowledge-power processes that inscribe and materialize the world in some forms rather than others." These knowledge-power processes reinforce the body norms that end up excluding the most vulnerable people in society. In our very unequal world, this means that a large portion of humanity is largely excluded from these technologies of self-improvement, as the more desirable technologies become branded as luxury items limited to those with access to the best health care systems or to those with the purchasing power to acquire the ideal body, piece by piece.

As I have pointed out recently (Jarrín and Pussetti, 2021), the "body-norm" becomes a morality tale that blames those outside the norm for their condition, portraying them as "lazy, unruly or negligent" for having bodies that do not measure up. Our apparently "free choice" is constrained and shaped by embodied forms of inequality that push us to see ourselves as imperfect, and to find in aesthetic biotechnologies the solution to those imperfections.

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Received on 31-12-2021. Accepted for publication on 09-01-2023.

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