

Understanding impacts of the beauty industry shutdown during COVID-19

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A study led by researchers from Swinburne's Center for Mental Health (CMH) has found that while most people reported spending less time investing in their appearance since COVID-19 began, individuals with

high dysmorphic concern (excessive preoccupation with a flaw in their appearance) continued to feel self-conscious about their appearance.

The study, which was published in the *International Journal of Eating Disorders* was conducted as part of the COVID-19 and you: mental health in Australia now survey ([COLLATE](#)) online survey.

Beauty services as a coping mechanism

As a precautionary measure against COVID-19, Australia implemented a widespread temporary closure of [beauty](#) and cosmetic services. Given that beauty services are widely used for [stress relief](#) and to enhance confidence, the study was conducted to explore the relationship between the closure of these services, distress, and engagement in other appearance-focused behaviors.

Participants with high and low levels of dysmorphic concern were compared to determine if COVID-19 restrictions affected these groups differently.

"High dysmorphic concern is common in individuals with Body Dysmorphic Disorder or eating disorders. Our research tells us that these individuals make up around 20 percent of the clientele seeking beauty and cosmetic treatments," says Toni Pikoos, lead author and Ph.D. candidate at the CMH.

She adds, "However, the positive results of beauty treatments are generally short-lived and can lead to an excessive focus on physical appearance in the long-term for these individuals. Nevertheless, we were concerned about the impact on these individuals when they were suddenly unable to access the treatments that they rely on to cope with life's challenges."

Participants were asked to:

- measure their extent of concern with [physical appearance](#)
- measure the frequency of engagement in appearance-related behaviors (such as grooming and mirror-checking)
- describe their negative emotional states (feelings of anxiety and depression)
- rate their distress regarding the disruption of beauty services (including nonsurgical and surgical cosmetic procedures)
- state if they had self-administered a beauty treatment during COVID-19 restrictions

COVID-19 restrictions and body image

The study found that at the end of the first lockdown in May, the general public reported that they were less interested in getting cosmetic treatment or surgery compared to before COVID-19.

However, the results were different for individuals with high dysmorphic concern. "Despite spending more time at home with reduced social interaction, these individuals continued to feel self-conscious about their appearance and frequently engaged in appearance-focused behaviors," explains Ms Pikoos.

"They also reported feeling distressed over the closure of beauty and cosmetic services and an increased desire to obtain future beauty treatments, including cosmetic procedures and major cosmetic surgeries relative to before COVID-19."

Informing future treatments

The study points to a need to better understand the long-term impacts of

COVID-19 restrictions on appearance-related distress to determine mental health priorities.

Treatment of [body image](#) disorders will often involve the gradual reduction of beauty and [cosmetic treatments](#), while at the same time developing alternative coping mechanisms to deal with anxiety and stress.

"The prompt implementation of COVID-19 restrictions may have 'ripped off the band-aid' for those who rely on beauty services to cope with negative emotions, which could exacerbate distress or lead to potentially harmful alternatives such as self-administered beauty procedures," Ms Pikoos explains.

It is crucial for [mental health](#) clinicians to be cognizant of potential appearance-related behavioral and emotional changes for clients during this time.

"Positively, the current shift to online and remote psychological therapies may also provide an opportunity to engage clients with body image disorders in treatment as they are traditionally difficult to engage in face-to-face therapy," Ms Pikoos concludes.

More information: Toni D Pikoos et al. The COVID-19 pandemic: Psychological and behavioral responses to the shutdown of the beauty industry, *International Journal of Eating Disorders* (2020). [DOI: 10.1002/eat.23385](https://doi.org/10.1002/eat.23385)

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