

Increased video call use is making people unhappy with how they look

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A new study by researchers from Swinburne's Centre for Mental Health shows that the spike in video call usage during the COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in many users feeling unhappy about their appearance.

This is one of the first empirical studies to explore potential consequences of [video](#) call usage on [appearance](#) dissatisfaction and interest in cosmetic procedures. Its findings are published in the *Aesthetic Surgery Journal*.

"Video communication differs from in-person interaction as the user is not only subject to visual scrutiny by others, but they also see themselves from an observer perspective. What's more, the [visual image](#) portrayed on video calls may create a warped self-perception as the close proximity to the camera can distort the appearance of facial features," says Dr. Toni Pikoos, lead author of the paper and recent Ph.D. graduate from the centre.

Increased dissatisfaction with appearance

The research team conducted an online survey of 335 adults currently living in Australia.

Thirty-six percent of respondents reported they had identified new aspects of their appearance they disliked while on video.

"Emerging concerns were mostly associated with facial appearance, such as noticing changes in the weight or shape of the face ("chubby cheeks" or a "double chin"), skin blemishes (wrinkles, pimples, sagging or complexion) or specific facial features (nose, eyes, lips, teeth)," says Dr. Pikoos.

These participants also reported greater interest in obtaining aesthetic procedures such as non-surgical cosmetic treatments and hairdresser services compared to before the pandemic.

To identify the degree of dysmorphic concern—in other words, concern relating to perceived defects in physical appearance—respondents completed the Dysmorphic Concern Questionnaire (DCQ).

"The DCQ measures the extent of concern with physical appearance. A high score is likely to indicate clinically significant body image concerns and has previously been associated with the presence of body dysmorphic disorder or eating disorders," Dr. Pikoos explains.

User behaviour and dysmorphic concern

Another key finding of the study was that it was most common for participants to focus their attention on a combination of their face and the face(s) of others.

"However, over a quarter of participants reported being primarily fixated on their own face, which was associated with a greater likelihood of identifying new appearance concerns and higher levels of dysmorphic concern," says Dr. Pikoos

Half of the sample reported engaging in video manipulation techniques, such as angling the camera or grooming to enhance their appearance. This behaviour was more likely in people with higher levels of

dysmorphic concern.

A small proportion of participants—eight percent—were actively avoiding video calls due to concerns about their appearance. This behaviour is also associated with dysmorphic concern, suggesting that the emphasis on video-based communication could isolate people with body image disorders.

"Individuals with high dysmorphic concern often report difficulties in social interactions due to the potential for visual scrutiny from others. This is further compounded on video calls where they are also exposed to their own appearance," Dr. Pikoos explains.

"This is concerning as these individuals may face greater interference in social and occupational functioning if they are unable to interact via video call," she adds.

Applying healthy video practices

While the increased popularity of video conferencing during the COVID-19 pandemic has several benefits, current research suggests that risks for the wellbeing and body image of video call users should be recognised.

"While new appearance concerns were more likely to emerge in participants with high dysmorphic concern, our findings suggest that this issue extends to the general population," says Dr. Pikoos.

Although individuals may not be able to control the amount of time spent on video in the current climate, they should adopt healthy video practices to maintain their wellbeing and self-confidence.

"This could include dedicating an equal amount of time to looking at the

face(s) of other callers, rather than fixating on their own face or hiding self-view on the camera to try and mimic in-person social interaction. However, the effectiveness of these strategies warrants further research," Dr. Pikoos concludes.

More information: Toni D Pikoos et al, The Zoom Effect: Exploring the Impact of Video Calling on Appearance Dissatisfaction and Interest in Aesthetic Treatment During the COVID-19 Pandemic, *Aesthetic Surgery Journal* (2021). [DOI: 10.1093/asj/sjab257](https://doi.org/10.1093/asj/sjab257)

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