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BEAUTY AS AN INVESTMENT: THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PHYSICAL APPEARANCE, SOCIAL STATUS, AND MENTAL WELL-BEING

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Beauty as an Investment: The Relationship between Physical Appearance, Social Status, and Mental Well-Being

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Abstract

Throughout history, additional dimensions have been ascribed to the human body, reflecting both individuals' self-perception and the way they are viewed by others. As a result, the body has constantly been influenced by rituals, customs, and treatments aimed at enhancing, modifying, displaying, adorning, or concealing certain features. The advancement of medicine in general and aesthetic medicine in particular, has made the pursuit of beauty more accessible. With the growing tendency to perceive the body as an evolving process and a "project", modern society increasingly treats it as a long-term investment, intended to confer advantages, prestige, and recognition. Researchers and sociologists have explored the connection between physical appearance and social or personal status, revealing a strong correlation between one's external look and societal standing. Their studies indicate that individuals actively strive to present themselves in the best possible way, aligning with social norms and class expectations. This pursuit involves maintaining a proper diet, engaging in physical activities, and undergoing various medical and cosmetic procedures. Aesthetic clinics serve as hubs for these services, helping individuals align their physical appearance with their personal and social aspirations. As a result, such clinics have witnessed a significant rise in popularity in recent years. This paper describes the effect of outer appearance s on the individuals' social position, what people are willing to do in order to change their appearance due to a social motive, and how this effect can be explained by theories and paradigms in the field of social sciences.

Keywords: sociology of the body; aesthetic medicine; body technique; lifestyle; aesthetics treatments.

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Introduction

This study explores the impact of a social, emotional, and health-oriented situation on the foundation of aesthetics clinics, the need for aesthetics treatments among men and women, and definition of future trends. The research aim is to investigate in what way beauty and aesthetic treatments help individuals in the acquisition, development, and internalization of their social and self-identity. Thus, they can adapt themselves to the units of reference and to society in general.

Since ancient times, additional dimensions have been attributed to the human body: psychological, associated with people's experience and its perception by the individuals; and social, constitutes essentially a relationship with others and the way they perceive people's appearance. Hence, the body has always been affected by ceremonies, customs, and treatments aiming to beautify, change, present, adorn, or cover certain of its parts. Today, there is a growing tendency to relate to the body as a process and as a 'project' (Nikson & Cojocaru, 2023). The body has become a long-range investment that is supposed to provide benefits, prestige, and respect. It, therefore, undergoes many changes throughout one's life, according to the person's needs or wishes. The social domination of the human body is manifested by varied forms, and serves mainly for preserving the social order (Wieczorkowska, 2018).

Treatments that aim to change the human body have been known for thousands of years. In India, in the 6th century B.C., reconstructions of the nose, ears, and mouth were performed (Nikson & Cojocaru, 2024). In China, since the 10th century A.C., women's legs were tied to fit the ideal of beauty (Hammond *et al.*, 2021; Wieczorkowska, 2018).

Parker, a sociologist who conducted in-depth qualitative research of cosmetic surgery, indicated that 'beauty surgery' was perceived at first as 'nonsense' and was a negative term until the beginning of the 19th century. The turning point in the field of social attitudes towards appearance-enhancing surgery was the development of surgical interventions following the two world wars, focusing on the enhancement of wounded soldiers' appearance. Reconstructive surgery of civil servants resulted in a different social perspective of appearance-enhancing surgery, and it was acknowledged as important, valued, and worthy of moral appreciation (Dean, Foley, & Ward, 2018).

In the modern world, medicine has made beauty more accessible, and aesthetic medical procedures are rapidly developing and becoming more popular. Body image is positively matched with physical and mental health (Zawdney, 2021).

Literature Review

Social status as a function of outer appearance

The empirical literature in this field illustrates a tight relationship between people's outer appearance and their social status, and people's tendency to act in order to look their best for the purpose of adapting themselves to social norms and classes. Several theories of social sciences engage in the investigation and comprehension of this relationship between outer appearance and social and personal status.

Sociology of the body and power genealogy

Sociology of the body is a branch of social sciences investigation, engaging in the role of human body in social, historical, and cultural interaction processes. Research of this field focuses on questions such as: what is the role of the body in social interaction processes (both as an expressive form and as an object of manipulations related to positions of power and authority); what is the symbolic meaning of the body in culture, mainly manifested by magical and religious ceremonies; what are the roles of social processes in the building of the body and how social relationships are demonstrated and encompassed in it.

The French philosopher Foucault (1979) is considered one of the founders of the theoretical approach in the sociology of the body. His ideas and concepts of "body techniques" had an essential effect on positions and theoretical approaches in this field. In his life-changing work "The body as a field of power", Foucault explores the place of female body in society. He argues that the communication media's hyper-generous glorification of ideal images of the female body, the tyranny of the thinness regime, and mass media, affect more and more the determination of aesthetic norms that regulate the body dimensions of both women and men.

In the term "genealogy of power", Foucault describes the modern power that organizes the social space according to the principle of "general supervision". All people are potentially or actually under supervision, as well as are constantly obliged to supervise themselves ("social optics"). Power constitutes a discipline that normalizes the behavior of individuals who are not independent, but rather shaped so that they can be taught and dominated. Accordingly, specific practices of power and domination define human body by punishment or benefits.

The modern beauty ritual constitutes, in fact, a meaningful supervision of the body. It comprises activities of daily self-cultivation leading up to obsessions, encourages mechanisms reducing differences for achieving a standardization of appearance, as well as aims to maintain a uniform, young, and slim look.

Foucault (1979) concludes that people in the present age are greatly affected by society as far as the body standardization and rationalization are concerned. Nevertheless, a rigid social order of this type cannot continue forever. Hence, an

approach that enables a space of choice, personal initiative, and wide variety of options for various tastes is becoming prevalent in modern society. The authoritative and bureaucratic order is substituted by regulation that is driven by a wide variety of methods and products for maintaining and nurturing one's appearance, figure, diet, sport-oriented and health lifestyle, as well as struggle against age marks and overweight. Moreover, these social effects are manifested by additional theories that deal with the relationship between outer appearance and social status. For example, Goffman (1961a), who argues that individuals compare and associate themselves to a certain group of society according to values and symbols, including outer appearance.

Theory of Symbolic Interaction

Another sociological paradigm that engages in the relationship between outer appearance and social relations is the Symbolic Interactionism Theory (Goffman, 1961a). This paradigm advocates that social reality is built on the basis of interactions between individuals in society, interactions that are grounded in symbols and interpretation. This is a micro approach, based on daily practices (sociology of daily life). According to this theory, individuals compare and assign themselves to a certain group in society by values and symbols, among them outer appearance. Individuals wish to confirm the perception and self-identity during the social interaction and the first impression in a social encounter is highly meaningful and leads to extensive drawing of conclusions that rely on outer appearance. Aesthetic medicine constitutes a tool that assists people in looking and feeling better and, hence, projects it also to the other party of the interaction.

Goffman (1961b) underscores that by activity and physical look; people present their belonging to a certain social class, conduct a valuable individual way of life and, not less importantly, interact with various aspects of the social environment. People can accomplish their goals by manipulating the impression they make on other people. On the other hand, the social environment can coerce certain standards of look on people. People's outer appearance can change according to the social environment in which they are living.

Goffman (1961a) dedicated much attention to the processes of physical self-presentation, and believed the body had an essential role, like an actor on a stage in the social arena. The main goal of "actors" in modern society is to create and maintain the desirable image at any cost and, in this sense, the body (particularly its appearance and movements) serves as a meaningful accessory. While participating in "social plays", individuals are always at risk of embarrassment and stigmatization – harming their good name. Once people find themselves in situations that embarrass them, they might "pretend". However, if this concerns a case of a stigma, it is very hard, sometimes even impossible, to change it.

Goffman includes the body structure in his "stigmatization" theory, in which he describes the harmful effects thereof, defining it as an activity, whereby other

people's reaction prevents the consolidation of a normal identity. Consequently, he included physical deviations, defects, and physical shortcomings as one of the three reasons for possible stigmatization. Moreover, when people experience a fear of stigmatization, they can perform dangerous manipulations of their body. For example, undergoing plastic surgery, adhering to an extreme diet, engaging in exaggerated sport activities, and up to demonstrating a risky behavior if they believe it is required by the group norms. A meaningful aspect in Goffman's perception is the importance attributed to self-presentation and outer appearance in daily life, however, also in additional social systems, such as the world of employment or political life. The body constitutes evidence and proof not only of personal attainments, but also of political, business, and family achievements. The image of successful people necessarily comprises "successful" body, namely a body that complies with certain social regulations. This leads to the setting up of social institutes, professions, and economic sectors, that serve the interests of a "theatrical" society: beauticians, dietitians, makeup professionals, plastic surgeons, image experts, and so on.

Goffman (1961b) translates the physical problem into a sociological theoretical level by presenting it as a problem of social identity and inclusion of individuals in the social environment. His theory advocates a relationship between the individuals' outer appearance and their belonging to a certain social-cultural environment. On the one hand, individuals can maneuver their identity by means of their body and consolidate their identity as they wish. On the other hand, social structures affect the individuals and, thus, discipline their social body and encourage the search for solutions designed to shape their outer appearance, such as aesthetic treatments .

Social messages in aesthetic medicine

As the above social theories illustrate, physical attraction intensity of the level of beauty and aesthetics, is perceived by the social environment as increasing the chances of success of individuals' functioning in society. In modern society, people belong simultaneously to a high number of groups. By means of social supervision mechanisms, each group guarantees people's conformity to the norms, values, and rules of conduct acceptable to it. In some cases, people have to choose between the frequently contradictory different norms of their groups of references. Nevertheless, individuals' behavior is not affected only by their groups of reference. It is also affected by values and norms of social groups which they wish to join, or by social groups in which they are not members but they relate to their values, namely serving them as a criterion of comparison – units of reference.

There are several types of units of reference or groups of reference:

- *A normative unit of reference* – individuals relate to the cultural values of the group in which they are not members. Yet, they wish to join it, seeing it as a normative group of reference.

- *Comparative unit of reference* – individuals who relate to the cultural values of a certain group, but do not wish to join it, seeing it as a comparative group of reference. People tend to adopt as a comparative unit of reference those groups or social units with achievements, status, and prestige that are similar to their own, wishing to eliminate completely the differences between them and these groups (Enoch, 2000).

Aesthetics clinics and aesthetic treatments

Aesthetics clinics provide aesthetic medical services that help people to adapt their body to their social and personal ambitions. These clinics include both physical infrastructure and the therapists' knowledge and competence. Aesthetic treatments are treatments for the prevention of skin aging, given in the clinics, while considering the improvement of the patients' quality of life.

An aesthetic/cosmetic surgery is the procedure by which tissues and distorted organs and/or the dimensions thereof are being changed according to the patients' taste and to ideal anatomical dimensions. The objective is partly treatment or beautification and partly both. Aesthetic surgery is part of plastic surgery. It includes Botox injections, facial rejuvenation surgery, endoscopic forehead surgery, skin regeneration (mechanical peeling, chemical peeling, laser surgery), filler applications (oil, silicone, Teflon, fascia, etc.), eye surgery, nasal aesthetics, ear aesthetics, jaw aesthetics, breast aesthetics (breast augmentation (silicone), breast reduction or lifting, breast reconstruction, body shaping surgery and tummy tuck, aspiration of fatty tissues (liposuction, liposhaping), gynecomastia (large breast in men), genitals aesthetics, and hair restoration (Baksi & Tuncer, 2021).

The value of the global market of aesthetic medicine was estimated at 52.5 billion dollars in 2018, with an average growing trend of 8.9% by 2016. This increase resulted from the introduction of more effective and minimally invasive techniques that entailed an increased number of aesthetic medicine consumers. According to the annual report of the Surgery National Databank, more than 4.5 million aesthetic procedures were performed in the United States in 2019, with an increasing rate of surgical and non-surgical procedures during the last five years. The expenses on aesthetic surgical procedures amounted to more than eight billion dollars in 2019, with a similar rate in 2021 (Hammond *et al.*, 2021; Sarwer, Magee, & Clark, 2003).

Personality variables and patient types

These operations are capable of offering a psychological medicine for people's "inferiority complex". Hence, doubts about the legitimacy of cosmetic surgery have been partly resolved, since they have attributed reliability to the perception that outer appearance has a strong impact on mental health (Edmonds, 2013). During the last decade, many studies that investigated the psychological aspects

of cosmetic surgery focused on the body image, believing that dissatisfaction with the body image motivates cosmetic surgery. Several studies found increased levels of dissatisfaction with the body image among people who underwent several aesthetic procedures, whereas other studies documented an improvement in the body image following surgery.

Based on data of more than 54000 participants in 17 different countries, Liew, Silberberg, & Chantrey (2020) defined four arch-types of patients, taking into consideration motivating factors, aesthetic goals, initial treatment requests, and opportunities and challenges in the treatment. Clinicians' ability to identify the patients' arch-type might provide a framework of reference for understanding their motives and expectations, offering the best and suitable therapeutic guidance for the patients' long-term goals.

- Beautification – characterized as patients focused on aesthetics in a congenital manner, well-groomed, fashionable, aspiring actively to maximize the potential of their attractiveness. They are highly affected by trends, fashion, social media, and treatment results of their peer group, inclined to match their aesthetic goals to a glamorous “appearance” (for example, a famous figure).
- Transformation – an arch-type characteristic of patients who wish to improve their social status or competitive advantage at work by achieving a specific ideal of beauty. In certain cases, this might reflect pressure exerted by a cultural and social beauty ideal.
- Correction – patients driven by a feature that they perceive as having an adverse impact on their life. They can be constantly troubled, and the certain feature or defect can lead to a continuous embarrassment, up to social withdrawal and loneliness. They focus less on a specific aesthetic ideal and more on the wish to re-balance or achieve a new proportion in order to feel more at ease. The varieties of troublesome features change a lot and can be congenital or acquired (for example, post-trauma, surgery or sickness).
- Positive aging – patients with a motivation to minimize the signs of face aging. These patients wish to make a gentle beauty change without changing “who” they are. They want to appear as a better version of themselves and adopt steps that prevent additional aging signs.

The diagnosis of the patients' arch-type might help both therapists and clinicians not only in understanding the patients' motives, but also in managing their expectations. Thus, they can guide the patients to choose treatments that optimally serve their long-term goals. A greater multi-dimensional understanding of the patients has eventually the potential to improve both the clinician-patient communication and the treatment approach, providing a more holistic way of treating the patients (Liew, Silberberg, & Chantrey, 2020).

Cultural beliefs and social theories

Positive effect of beauty treatments is more than just enhancement of the physical appearance, emphasizing the importance of the social perception. Social impact is an essential part of people and has supreme importance. The popularity of aesthetic treatments has considerably increased while focusing on the relation between physical appearance and well-being perception (Atiyeh *et al.*, 2021; Daran *et al.*, 2019; Paoli & Procacci, 2019).

Today, there is a growing tendency to relate to the body as a process and as a 'project'. The body has become a long-range investment that is supposed to provide benefits, prestige, and respect. It, therefore, undergoes many changes throughout one's life, according to the person's needs or wishes. The social domination of the human body is manifested by varied forms, and serves mainly for preserving the social order (Wieczorkowska, 2018). During the last 30 years, studies of social psychology investigated the role of physical appearance in people's daily life, in order to examine how attractive and unattractive people are perceived by others. The results of these studies are most consistent: we attribute more positive personality properties to attractive people and they are more positively referred to in varied social interactions. Moreover, studies show that more positive character properties (healthy and accessible) are attributed to people who have undergone aesthetic treatments. These people are perceived as having a better social ability, are young, attractive, successful in attracting others, and have a higher social status than other people (Sarwer, Magee, & Clark, 2003).

Taking into consideration these physiological and socio-cultural effects, the growing popularity of medical treatments and cosmetic surgery is not surprising. These treatments have undoubtedly a positive impact on external appearance and, hence, have the potential to promote people's psychological well-being and social interactions (Sarwer, Magee, & Clark, 2003).

Today's world is changing faster than ever due to the global accessibility offered by the Internet. The television, Internet, and social media are full of messages about beauty and the way to attain ideal beauty. Reduced costs, technological developments that shorten the recovery period, and safe and less invasive procedures, promote the implementation of aesthetic surgery. Modern society is highly sensitive to people's external appearance and the mass media enhance it as a property of success in all areas of life. Attractiveness and young-ness are worldwide trends of ritual that dictate changes in the customers' values and preferences (Atiyeh *et al.*, 2021; Baksi & Tuncer, 2021; Musatova *et al.*, 2020).

The progress of medical technology, combined with a rapid growth of mass media that are based on the Internet and social networks, have considerably increased also the public accessibility to cosmetic surgery (Yoon & Kim, 2020). All these socio-cultural trends have a strong impact on the growing wish for aesthetic treatments (Atiyeh *et al.*, 2021; Wieczorkowska, 2018).

When properly used, social media can offer a huge variety of benefits, both for educational purposes and for marketing purposes. Surgeons use the social media for marketing and branding, education of the public, and direct communication with patients. Taking into consideration the current social climate and the public's expectations, surgeons' involvement in the social media is inevitable and it is here to stay, at least in the foreseeable future. Yet, as the demand for elective aesthetic surgery continues growing, it is necessary to assess the impact of advertisements in the social media. How do they motivate people to undergo plastic surgery procedures? How does it affect the plastic surgery practice? Furthermore, it is necessary to urgently determine what is the right and efficient way of marketing it, while observing medical ethics (Atiyeh *et al.*, 2021).

Methodology

Research question

What is the patients' perception of the desire for aesthetic treatments before and during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Research design

To explore patients' perception of the desire for undergoing aesthetic treatments during the COVID-19 pandemic, a qualitative analysis of five in-depth interviews with patients was performed – by themes and categories

Research participants

Table 1: Description of participants in the qualitative research

Participant	Description
1	A 40-years old homosexual, had 13 operations, including muscle implants in the breast, injections in the lips (papion).
2	A 48-years old woman, weighing 47 kilos, with a cc 925 silicone implant on each side. She underwent five operations in the breast, injections every few months.
3	A 27-years old woman, wants to look like an anime Japanese doll, applies make-up, tattoos, hair color, cc 625 silicone on each side, dreams about a partner that will also look like a Japanese figure.
4	A 46-years old woman, undergoes treatments every week, injections, had 5 operations, wants to look young forever. She undergoes every new treatment on the market: tummy tuck, breast lifting, liposuction.

Results

Reasons for deciding to undergo aesthetic treatments during the COVID-19 pandemic

The interviewees emphasized in fact the impact of the aesthetic treatment on the self-concept aspect. Moreover, they added several layers: the first layer engaged in their emotional feeling about the state of addiction; the second layer engaged in identity; and the third layer engaged in self-confidence.

Regarding emotional addiction, the interviewees stated:

"A person who does not have a strong soul that can contain it, can collapse as a result of it" (interviewee 1).

"This is something obsessive also about myself or OCD... I was so enthusiastic that I wanted to increase my breasts once more... Every 7-8 years I am changing the implants. After that, due to my enthusiasm, I also wanted to increase my breasts, a type of addiction to pain" (interviewee 3).

"I am addicted to surgery" (interviewee 5).

The interviewees referred to the issue of identity:

"People expect me to be some kind of living example of everything in which I believe" (interviewee 1).

"I am supposed to transmit something in which I believe... I did not like to see myself in the mirror with my breasts and this is something that is only mine. It did not bother me what people were thinking... the bigger my breasts, the more I like it" (interviewee 3).

"You wake up in the morning and ask yourself whether you are a woman or a man? All my life I used to get up in the morning, looked in the mirror and saw something else. It took me many years to make a decision... I was sure that I would feel less good with myself, so I transmitted it also towards other people" (interviewee 4).

The following statements attested to the participants' perception of self-confidence:

... told me if something happened, I would be here for you and then I said OK I feel comfortable, I feel good, we go for it... In fact that I will have a father and mother in case something happens to me... Confidence is very important to people about to undergo a procedure that is life-changing (interviewee 4).

I am doing all these things for me, I don't care about my surroundings... the aesthetic treatment impact first of all my self-confidence, I feel comfortable walking around")interviewee 2).

The interviewees underscored the effect of the cosmetic treatment on the social dimension in three layers: personal feeling of shame, one's surroundings and the community, and the social media.

I was really ashamed to sit with my face profile turned towards people. At a certain time, I avoided going much out of the office, I avoided meetings (interviewee 2).

There is something that is difficult to understand if you were not a fat person and were a person with an external visibility that was socially rejected... You always feel you are being checked and you feel small and insignificant... this diminishes your personality (interviewee 1).

I always get reactions from my surroundings that I don't look my age... the surgery enhanced my self-confidence... it changed me entirely. I actually felt like another person, it made me feel confident of myself (interviewee 2).

Sometimes, women are frightened by the size. They hear the number of the size and get scared (interviewee 3).

My friends understand me... people look at me as if I was crazy (interviewee 5).

Let's say that something interests me. I prefer reading an article on this topic, less ads. Publicity does not talk to me (interviewee 2).

If I see on the media something new, some advertisement, I do want to know if it is risky in one way or another (interviewee 3).

I follow many posts on Instagram (interviewee 5).

The interviewees highlighted the effect of the cosmetic treatment on the dimension of mental well-being by two layers: the first layer engaged in medical issues, such as overweight and acne, and the second layer engaged in visibility.

I have tried trainings in a gym, have tried all the possible options. I told myself that I had to undergo a certain way in order to obtain the body I want. I came with extremely, extremely high skin excess (interview 1).

Particularly as far as feminine aesthetic is concerned. It is so important also from the health point of view (interviewee 2).

It leaked, it was like two bags, my breast looked awful and I needed a lifting procedure... Botox helped me a lot in a way that is hard to explain to what extent (interview 3).

Like in the interviews, various studies of visibility and external appearance found a relationship between a physical link and health and mental-emotional state (Atiyeh *et al.*, 2021; Navas *et al.*, 2019; Paoli & Procacci, 2019). The main aim of aesthetic surgery is to find a solution for people's dissatisfaction with their body, and physical changes are expected to have a positive effect on their mental condition (Pruzinsky & Cash, 1990).

This study found a strong relationship between body and motivation for undergoing cosmetic procedures and plastic surgery. On the other hand, Matera *et al.* (2018) argued they had not found a physical link for undergoing aesthetic treatments among men. Males tended to compare their body to the body of other

people and, consequently, made a decision to have aesthetic procedures in order to change their appearance.

So my breast was the most important thing that has ever happened to me. I am in love with my breast... I feel that I am looking great for my age (interviewee 1).

I am 48 years old but I find it very hard to accept my age. I am not ready to feel or look older. I don't think that a woman should look old and wrinkled... the wish to avoid looking wrinkles, not older (interviewee 2).

... I look the way I want to look, look extreme, look different, perhaps strange in the eyes of others (interviewee 5).

The interviewees emphasized their motivation for undergoing aesthetic treatments in two aspects: extrinsic motivation and intrinsic motivation.

People look at me a lot and I can already identify when the looks imply 'OK, we know it's not real', and the looks that imply 'how do you' ... All this motivates me more for working on my body (interviewee 1).

People tell me that I don't look my age... (interviewee 2).

I see people who have studied with me, and friends, and everyone is telling me that I have not changed at all... it's great hearing it (interviewee 3).

I feel whole with myself, because if I had not been whole with myself, I would not be able to say it out loud (interviewee 1).

This is something in my nature... that I want to do everything in the best way possible (interviewee 2).

Since I was 12 years' old I wanted to make tattoos and look like the Japanese doll Anime... I have always aspired to look like the Anime doll... I earned myself the money for my first surgery at the age of 17 (interviewee 5).

Similarly to the quantitative part of this study, the interviewees emphasized the effect of the aesthetic treatments during the COVID-19 pandemic in two layers: a change in the lockdowns and the online meetings via zoom. Moreover, as the quantitative part of this study showed, the interviewees emphasized the profound impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the perception of and desire for aesthetic treatments. The restrictions imposed by the pandemic, characterized by lockdowns and enforced isolation, created a unique context that affected the individuals' relationships with their appearance.

Specifically, the increased reliance on virtual communication platforms, such as Zoom, enhanced people's facial features. This constant exposure to one's own image on screen led many to scrutinize their appearance more closely, potentially exacerbating body image concerns and the desire for aesthetic enhancements. Conversely, the limitations imposed by lockdowns and social distancing measures may have also provided individuals with increased time for self-reflection and consideration of personal goals, including aesthetic improvements.

"You obviously see yourself in the mirror every day. If you communicate via zoom, your visibility has actually changed" (interviewee 1).

"During the COVID-19 pandemic my son was very young and, then, from a person who works a full-time job, I have become a housewife, doing the things that make you fat, inactive physically... I reached a situation that, for example, when I had meetings via zoom, I could not even turn on the camera, I was really ashamed of it... how it is possible that until the meetings via zoom I have not seen that i have such a chin... it was simply awful" (interviewee 2).

"During the COVID-19 crisis I had a greater need for treatments. I ate constantly, I was concerned about my body, I was afraid of the pandemic" (interviewee 4).

"The COVID-19 crisis was terrible... I wanted more lips, more makeup, because I communicated only via zoom" (interviewee 5).

The interviews illustrated that the COVID-19 pandemic significantly impacted participants' body image and the desire for aesthetic treatments. The increased use of video conferencing platforms, such as Zoom, played a crucial role in this process.

Discussion

This study explores the intricate relationship between beauty treatments, self-identity, and social identity, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. It aims to understand on what way aesthetic procedures impact individuals' self-perception and social integration, considering various factors, such as personality, cultural beliefs, and marketing.

The examples illustrated the interviewees' state of identity. Some reactions were supportive while others empowered the sense of the interviewees' identity vis-à-vis others. This was illustrated by the words of interviewee 1 who described what people expected from him. Identity-oriented pressures, self-perception norms, and the wish to comply with expectations also of yourself versus others, could greatly affect the decision to turn to aesthetic treatments. This identity-oriented situations, whereby patients feel obsessiveness towards themselves and in the face of society, give rise to the question: "Is there a self-perception component in which patients feel freer without constant criticism?"

A component that is not less important is the self-confidence that has a considerable impact on the patients, particularly when this concerned a change of self-perception following the therapeutic intervention, as stated by interview 2: *"The surgery greatly increased my self-confidence and changed me entirely"*.

Furthermore, the interviews illustrated the reactions of the surroundings. Some reactions were supportive while others empowered the sense of the interviewees' shame. This was manifested by the words of interviewee 2 who described that people looked at her as if she was crazy. Social pressures, cultural norms, and

the wish to be integrated to meet the social expectations, could greatly affect the decision to undergo aesthetic treatments. In this social situation, whereby patients feel a sense of shame, and society exerts pressures on them, the question is raised: Is there a social component in which patients feel freer without constant criticism?"

The social media had a meaningful effect on the patients, particularly when they related to medical update or risks during the cosmetic intervention. According to the interviewees, the social media gave them a 'scientific' support and, sometimes, even justification or lack of justification for the steps they had decided to take in this field.

The concept of beauty has always existed in the human mind and it has deep philosophical roots. Over the years, researchers have conceived various social theories that aimed to understand the relationship between outer appearance and social status. Moreover, these theories examined the individuals' reasons and motives for changing and upgrading their outer appearance as a tool for improving their mental health and place in the social and cultural order (Foucault, 1979; Goffman, 1961a). Interviewee 3 expressed it in the interview:

"I see people who have studied with me, and friends, and everyone is telling me that I have not changed at all... it's great hearing it" (interviewee 3).

Studies conducted in recent years (e.g., Atiyeh *et al.*, 2021; Dayan *et al.*, 2019; Minevra, 2019; Paoli & Procacci, 2019), have shown that the positive effect of beauty treatments are more than just a tool for improving one's appearance and physical health. Rather, they have a crucial importance in social perception. The impact of social perception is an essential part of people's soul and the highest importance is attributed to it. Hence, the popularity of aesthetic treatments has considerably increased as mediators between physical look and personal and social wellness perception.

In the interviews, the participants talked less about physical health. However, the aesthetic procedures had definitely an impact also on the patients' physiology, as attested by interviewee 4:

"You wake up in the morning and ask yourself whether you are a woman or a man? All my life I used to get up in the morning, looked in the mirror and saw something else. It took me many years to make a decision... I was sure that I would feel less good with myself, so I transmitted it also towards other people" (interviewee 4).

Cosmetic procedures that were initially ridiculed by plastic surgeons, were acknowledged following the second world war. Today, medicine facilitates the creation of beauty, making it more accessible than ever. Aesthetic medical procedures are developing quickly, becoming more popular and improving considerably the quality of life. A positive body image is associated with physical and mental health, regardless of race and gender (Edmonds, 2013; Zawodny, Kulig,

& Sienko, 2021). The interviews clearly indicated a considerable improvement of everything associated with the quality of life. For example:

"The surgery greatly increased my self-confidence and changed me entirely" (interviewee 2).

Combined with the increasingly growing number of patients wishing to undergo cosmetic surgery, the research of this field is expanding in three main trends: the psychopathology of cosmetic surgery consumers, demand for cosmetic surgery, as well as the extent of mass media impact, or the celebrities' ritual, on the supply and demand of cosmetic operations. Although the goals, reasons, and expectations of people wishing to undergo aesthetic surgery are different, the parameters affecting the wish to undergo aesthetic surgery are divided into three major areas: "personality variables", "cultural beliefs", and "marketing variables" (Baksi & Tuncer, 2021; Yoon & Kim, 2020).

One of the questions to the interviewees was whether they had been influenced by the mass media. They answered that the publicity did not necessarily affect their decision. For example:

"I am doing all these things for me, I don't care about my surroundings... the aesthetic treatment impact first of all my self-confidence, I feel comfortable walking around")interviewee 2).

Conclusion

This study explored the way beauty and aesthetics treatments assisted individuals in the acquisition, development, and internalization of their self-identity and social identity. Thus, they were able to adapt themselves to the units of reference, and to society in general. This study aimed to investigate the relationship between people's social, emotional, and health effects and their referral to the field of aesthetic medicine. It examined whether there were differences on the level of self-perception between people who had undergone aesthetic treatments and those who had not.

The research aim was: "To explore patients' perception of the desire for undergoing aesthetic treatments during the COVID-19 pandemic". Hence, this study investigated the relationship between quality of life, marital status, and socio-demographic aspects and men's need for aesthetics treatments. Furthermore, it examined the patients' perception of the need for aesthetics treatments during the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings indicated the effect of a social, emotional, and health-oriented situation on the foundation of aesthetics clinics and the need for aesthetics treatments among men and women.

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