

Mirror, Mirror on the Screen: The Tyranny of Zoom Calls

Working from home was supposed to turn people into slobs. But many say constant video calling has heightened their awareness of their appearance by putting them on camera all day.

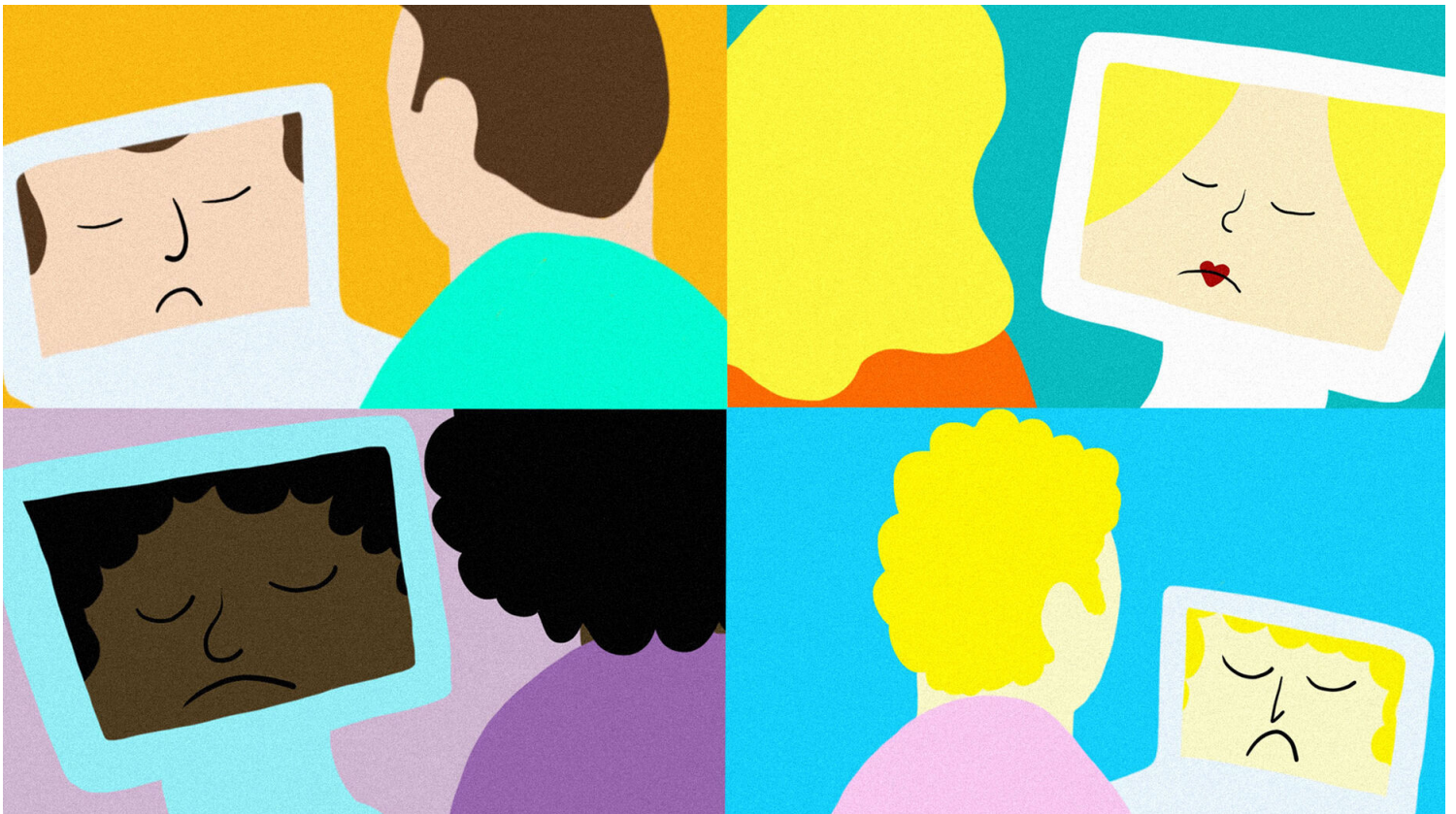


Illustration by Mike Sullivan

By Zoë Bernard

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Carolyn West had never considered getting lip injections before. But that all changed a few weeks ago when participating in video calls became a part of her daily work routine.

Like the rest of her company's employees, West, a tax accountant in Philadelphia, had started working from home because of the coronavirus pandemic. The influx of virtual meetings led to West spending a lot of time staring at an image of herself on her computer and coming to the uncomfortable realization that she wasn't happy with her appearance. "It's because I have to look at them on Zoom all day," she said, referring to her lips.

THE TAKEAWAY

Many people say that the amount of time they spend looking at themselves on video calls has made them more preoccupied with the way they look—and that may play a role in beauty trends of the future.

By now, it's a cliché that the migration of professional and social life online has made many people relax their standards regarding personal hygiene and dress. But for many others, nonstop video calling has made them more preoccupied than ever with their own appearance. It doesn't help that they get to see their own faces reflected back at them through the grainy, unflattering lens of a computer camera.

For these people, self-isolation is unexpectedly creating a new set of beauty priorities. Elaborate skin care routines, hair masks, teeth whitening and—as risky as it sounds—DIY haircuts reign. This season's must-have accessories aren't Prada handbags or Louboutin heels—they're portable lights to better illuminate one's face on video calls and zany Zoom backdrops to express one's personality.

"You'd think that staying at home would make me less concerned about my appearance," said Abby Lyall, a program director at venture firm Big Idea Ventures who now

over video calls. “I’m now more obsessed with the way I look than ever because of all of these video calls. I’ll put on makeup to sit around my house.”

West, the tax accountant, said she too has begun wearing more makeup than usual because of her video calls, though she says she isn’t doing it to impress others. “I’m doing it for me,” she said. “I don’t want to destroy the illusion I have of myself.”

For West, who is 50, the deluge of video calls is a constant reminder that she isn’t “25 anymore,” she said. “You look different on camera than you do in the mirror.”

Portrait Lighting

For Maren Donovan, founder of job placement company Inde, a recent investment in a type of lighting often used in portrait photography made her feel better about how she looks on video calls. “I’m never in a conference room or pitching a [venture capitalist] and wondering how I look while I’m pitching them,” said Donovan. “But being on a video call is like seeing yourself in a mirror at a bar. Once you notice yourself, then you’re constantly checking.”

John Farrell, a history professor at California State University, Fresno, said that moving his classroom to video calls has made him more self aware. “I shave more,” he said. “I have certainly been aware of my forehead and its breadth.”

Farrell said that instead of using a Zoom backdrop, he has carefully arranged a background tableau to better convey his personality to his students. The items include a Barack Obama poster, several books, a Russian flag, and a pair of baby shoes from when he was six months old. “I’m using my physical stuff to communicate my style and personalize myself,” he said. “We’re only presenting a portion of ourselves, but the portion we present, we really want to look good.”

People who work in the beauty industry say they also believe our new dependence on technology is affecting our self-image. “Zoom has accentuated pain points, especially for women of any demographic around their self perception and how they believe look, perform and comport themselves,” said Elizabeth Kopelman, a beauty b who has advised companies like Johnson & Johnson and Neutrogena.

“It’s not being on camera that’s the problem, it’s seeing yourself on camera,” said Marnie Goldberg, a YouTuber who reviews beauty products and recently created a video tutorial about how to look better on Zoom calls after several of her followers asked for advice. “Being on video calls is like looking in a mirror for an extended period of time. It isn’t a normal thing to do.”

Most video-calling applications give users the option of hiding their own faces on their screens, though many people choose not to do so, if only so they can make sure they are framed properly and otherwise presentable to other participants. Zoom also has a “touch up my appearance” option that slightly softens a caller’s features.

‘You look different on camera than you do in the mirror.’

While some people have found themselves increasingly preoccupied with their perceived flaws, others have found creative ways to cheat the camera to their benefit. One woman, who asked not to be identified out of embarrassment, told *The Information* that she recently used a piece of transparent tape to obscure her double chin as a joke during a virtual happy hour. The adjustment was so effective—and unnoticeable—that the woman said she was considering applying the chin tape on all her future video calls.

The ability to manipulate a camera in daily social interactions using the same artful deception a high-fashion photo shoot would rely on is what Kopelman, the beauty brand strategist, views as a two-dimensional beauty phenomenon with “tremendous upside.”

“This is a net win for beauty,” Kopelman said. “It could spawn a whole new category of beauty products. Now, we all have cameras to hide our flaws, and brands will respond to this. Do I need an instantaneous face-lift? Yeah, I do, but I don’t need the surgical piece—I can do it with tape. Now we all have smoke and mirrors.”

Beauty Boost

Some sellers of beauty products say they have seen a jump in business, which is notable at a time when people are cooped up in their homes. Arnaud Plas, co-founder and CEO of e-commerce hair care company Prose, said that since mid-March his company has seen a roughly 80% increase in sales for its hair oil and scalp mask products.

The sales surge could be partly because people have had to become totally self-reliant when it comes to their beauty routines. With salons shut down, people are learning to cut their own hair, perform their own skin care treatments and apply their own acrylic nails.

This has been the case for Joey Branca, a 27-year-old actor based in Salt Lake City, who has lately applied the same zeal he has recently reserved **for baking bread** to his at-home beauty routine. Despite being relegated to the confines of his home, Branca has become increasingly diligent in his “pretty intense” skin care routine, which includes regular microneedling and chemical peels. Branca counts himself lucky to be in self-isolation with his mother, a licensed aesthetician.

For Branca, the diligence he is applying to his personal appearance is more than holding onto the semblance of a routine: it’s an expression of hope that someday soon the world will return to normal. “We are all prepping for this weird unknown,” he said. “When the world opens back up, it’s an event that we will all look great for.”

Some businesses that dispense Botox and other treatments say they are hearing from customers who have spent a lot of time on Zoom calls and are eager to come in when these businesses are open again. Gabrielle Garritano, founder of Ject, which operates several beauty bars in the New York area, said her company has received an uptick in interest among clients considering medical-grade cosmetic treatments like Botox or fillers in recent weeks.

“A lot of the patients have entertained the thought of getting Botox or trying a certain service, and now they’re on Zoom calls and looking at themselves on camera all day. It’s the deciding factor,” said Garritano, who closed her three New York offices as a result of the pandemic. “People are telling me, ‘I want to come see you the day you open.’”

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CEO, Mightybell

1 day ago

The fact that this story has roughly 4 women profiled, one 27-year-old male actor, and one male history professor who has decided he should probably shave feels like the higher standards for beauty and appearance that disproportionately falls on professional women is alive and well digitally.

That really shouldn't be news.

Moreover, by not calling this out as what it is—massively different expectations for women around appearance that require surgery, not shaving— and making it seem like this is (1) a new phenomenon (not true) and (2) impacting "all people" (also not true), this article seems to reinforce stereotypes that women are preoccupied with their appearance, are more vain, self-conscious, and/or less focused on the work at hand because they are busy thinking about getting lip injections during your important meeting.

Also important to note, these same (mainly) professional women are also taking the responsibility for homeschooling, food/cooking, and housework in addition to their right now.

I, for one, would like to give them a break.

So, if you're going to write stories about Zoom lip injections, at least put it in the larger context of expectations of professional women and how they differ from professional male peers (none of whom are featured in this story).

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