

Exploring the post-COVID lipstick effect: a short report

Introduction

The global coronavirus pandemic (Covid) has substantially negatively impacted the whole fashion industry, shifting consumer behaviour, disrupting supply chains, and affecting the leading companies in the field (*Business of Fashion*, 2019, 2020, 2021). The Covid pandemic-related crisis, however, has enhanced the beauty industry sales. Indeed, we have seen a 100 to 800% rise in skin-care, hair-care, body, nail, and DIY self-care product sales in 2020 compared to the same periods in 2019 for e-commerce (*Business of Fashion*, 2020). This increased sales of cosmetics and make-up have already been witnessed in crises such as the Great Recession of 2007-2009 and tracing back to the Great Depression of the 1930s (Elliott, 2008; Martinez and Allison, 2010; Statista, 2021). This phenomenon has been named ‘the lipstick effect’. MacDonald and Dildar (2020) proposed three hypotheses to explain the lipstick effect: (1) the psychological hypothesis, i.e., women purchased more makeup because they want to treat themselves, (2) an anthropological hypothesis, i.e., women purchased more makeup in order to better attract mates, (3) an employment-based hypothesis, i.e., women purchased more makeup in order to increase their chance to be (better) employed.

Some research has highlighted a change in consumer behaviour patterns during the Covid crisis, e.g., panic buying, hedonic purchase, in-store shopping rejection, changing discretionary spending, or gaining interest in how brands treat their employees (Kirk and Rifkin, 2020; Knowles et al., 2020; Koch et al., 2020; Loxton et al., 2020; Naeem, 2021). However, those studies did not focus on clothing and beauty consumption per se. To our knowledge, only one study explored the clothing consumer

pattern change in light of the Covid pandemic. Using content analysis, Liu et al. (2021) studied 68,511 relevant tweets collected from January 2020 to September 2020. Their outcomes revealed several interesting themes: safety concerns (shipment from China, virus on clothing, protective clothing, sanitising clothing), consumption disruption (concerns over resale and rental services, concerns over buying special clothing, concerns over in-store shopping, concerns over shipping), pent-up demand (stop or put off purchases, longing for “corona sales”), consumption transition (putting on weight and ‘shrinking clothes’, shift in clothing style, decluttering and donation, ethics awareness), and consumption change (adapting to new clothing style, digitalisation).

The aim of this research note is to explore the potential existence of the post-Covid lipstick effect, by assessing the impact of the Covid crisis on clothing and beauty practices.

Study 1

To collect rich data to investigate participants’ subjective experiences in depth, fashion practices have already been investigated using qualitative methods (Buentello et al, 2022; Masuch & Hefferon, 2014; Nessim & Bardey, 2022). To our knowledge, there is no research evaluating the impact of life crises on fashion practices. The novel nature of the subject matter warrants a qualitative approach for collecting rich data to investigate participants’ subjective experiences in depth (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Using qualitative research, this study will explore fashion and beauty practices throughout the first (from 17th March to 11th May 2020) and second (from the 30th October to 15th December 2020) lockdowns. Data were collected from March 2022 to February 2023.

Method. Participants were recruited using **convenience** and snowball sampling. Our institution's ethics panel has approved this study. 17 participants (9 women and 8 men) aged 22.47 years old (± 2.12) volunteered to participate in this study. All participants were students living in France by the time of the first and second lockdowns and at the time of the interviews. We choose to exclusively recruit students without any care or professional responsibilities in order to isolate their fashion (i.e., clothing and beauty) practice during the lockdown from any parental or managerial pressure. Data saturation was reached with this sample.

After providing informed consent, participants took part in a 1:1 semi-structured interview lasting around 30-35 minutes. We aimed to understand participants' clothing and beauty practices before, during and after the first and second lockdowns. Open-ended questions such as “Can you tell me about your clothing/beauty routine during the lockdown?” and “Did you change anything in your clothing/beauty routine since the start of the Covid pandemic?” were used in order to elicit rich, exploratory data (Smith et al. 2009), and questions were constructed to probe the lived experience involved in clothing and beauty practices before, during and after the first lockdown, participants were verbally debriefed following the interview.

In order to highlight common practices among our participants, thematic analysis was used to analyse the data following Braun and Clarke (2006)'s approach. All interviews were transcribed *verbatim*. All transcripts were read multiple times, highlighting descriptive words and phrases. Then, the second stage was a more systematic and critical reading of the transcripts to identify and codify interesting features in the text. The third stage was grouping these codes into themes. The fourth stage consisted of summarising participants' themes, keywords, and quotes into a

thematic map. The fifth and final step was refining and naming themes and subthemes. The first author was in charge of the data analysis.

Findings. Our thematic analysis showed different fashion practices (i.e., clothing and beauty) between men and women. While our female participants took the opportunity to “find themselves” during the first lockdown, men didn’t change their clothing or cosmetic practice.

All our male participants mentioned they kept the same clothing practice, i.e., either wearing sporty, comfortable clothes or wearing jeans, elegant polo shirts, or even shirts. Whatever their clothing style was, male participants did change it since the first lockdown. While a few male participants kept their existing (and minimalist) cosmetic routine, most of our male participants did not start a new cosmetic routine with the lockdown and kept a minimal interest towards cosmetic and beauty practices.

All our female participants mentioned that they used their free time during the first lockdown to get more information about beauty routines, practice sports activities (i.e., online fitness classes) and pay more attention to their own body. Half of our female participants mentioned that this beauty interest was to occupy their free time, and the other half said that they had been waiting to take time for themselves. For all our female participants, this led to an actual interest in finding the best product for their body and face, as underlined in Table 1.

INSERT TABLE 1 HERE

This ‘time for me’ also led all our female participants to reflect on their own fashion and beauty practices realizing that they were too focused on beauty standards

and what other people could think about them, as underlined in Table 1. Our female participants aimed to move away from social pressure in order to find their authentic self.

Since the lockdown, all our female participants mentioned having changed their clothing and beauty practices. Their beauty (cosmetics and make-up) practice during and post-lockdown has been much more focused on ‘looking after your skin’ cosmetics (e.g., serum, high-quality and/or organic face cream, face mask) and fewer amounts of make-up (except one female participant who mentioned that she has been wearing similar amount of make-up). Regarding their clothing practice, all our female participants mentioned having changed their clothing style compared to the pre-lockdown period, but they described different styles, from comfortable clothes to feminine clothes. The common point of these new clothing styles is that it better reflects the inner self of our participants, as one participant nicely summarized by claiming, “*I had the feeling that I had found myself*”. Two out of our female participants had to dress up with their ‘pre-Covid fashion style’, and they both had the feeling that they were “*putting their social mask from my former life – and it doesn’t belong to me anymore*”.

Our participants’ reflections on their fashion practice led them to question themselves about sustainability in fashion. From non-organic ingredients in cosmetics and make-up to the issues related to fast fashion, our participants all mentioned paying more attention to sustainability since the first lockdown and trying to translate this increased attention to consumer behaviour, i.e., purchasing fewer clothes, purchasing better quality clothes, avoiding buying fast-fashion clothes, and finding more information about cosmetics products. All our female participants mentioned feeling

happier and more positive about their own body since their new fashion practice, as underlined in Table 1.

While our first study didn't underline any change in our male participants' fashion practices, our analysis highlighted an impact of Covid on female participants' clothing and beauty practices. Indeed, our female participants have changed their clothing style to better fit with their inner identity, i.e., their authentic self, and have modified their make-up and cosmetic use routines accordingly.

Study 2

Study 2 aimed to quantitatively examine the impact of the Covid crisis on clothing practice, self-esteem and well-being. Our hypothesis was: *H1-The Covid crisis had an impact on consumers' clothing practice.*

Methods. Participants were recruited using convenience and snowball sampling. Students and young working-age adults participated in our study. A total of 111 female participants aged 22,18 years old ($\pm 5,95$) volunteered to participate in this study. Data were collected from March 2022 to February 2023. Our institution's ethics panel has approved this study.

Our participants were invited to complete the Clothing Practice Inventory (CPI). The Clothing Practice Inventory (FPI) has been developed by our team based on Almaguer Buentello et al. (2022) qualitative study. Table 2 shows the Cronbach Alpha coefficient per sub-scale. The CPI survey includes three sub-scales: Colour (Low score = opts for muted colours / High score = opts for vivid colours and wide colour range), Fit and sizing (Low score = opts for loose-fitting clothing / High score = opts for form-fitting clothing), and Comfort (Low score = willing to sacrifice pleasant tactile

experience and mobility for other factors / High score = values pleasant textures and mobility). Each sub-scale includes 4 items (see Table 2) and responses are recorded on a Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). The average score of the 4 items gave the sub-scale score. The participants were required to complete the Fashion Practice Inventory regarding their fashion practice twice, once thinking about before the Covid pandemic and once since the start of the Covid pandemic, to capture retrospective subjective opinions on changes in their fashion behaviour.

INSERT TABLE 2 HERE

Findings. Table 3 shows the Clothing Practice Inventory variables (colour, fit, comfort, self-identity) before and since the start of the Covid pandemic.

INSERT TABLE 3 HERE

The results of a paired-sample t-test (see Table 3) did not show any difference for the Fit/Sizing variable before vs since the beginning of the Covid crisis ($p > .05$), meaning participants continued shopping for and using the same fit/size clothes. Our analysis showed a significant change in the score for Colour ($p < 0.5$) and Comfort ($p < .01$). Thus, female consumers have been looking for more vivid colours and a wider range of colours since and after the first lockdown. Furthermore, they have been looking for more pleasant textures and mobility clothes since and after the first lockdown. Thus, H1 was fully supported.

Study 3

Study 3 aimed to quantitatively examine the impact of the Covid crisis on make-up practice. The following hypotheses were posited:

H2: The Covid crisis had an impact on consumers' makeup practice (i.e., frequency);

H3: The Covid crisis had an impact on consumers' makeup practice (i.e., quantity).

Method. Participants were recruited using convenience and snowball sampling. Students and young working-age adults participated in our study. A total of 100 female participants aged 30.40 years old (± 10.25) volunteered to participate in this study. Data were collected from March 2022 to February 2023. Our institution's ethics panel has approved this study.

Our participants were invited to complete two questionnaires: (1) Frequency make-up questionnaire and (2) Quantity make-up questionnaire. Each Frequency and Quantity questionnaire has three makeup sub-scores: (1) Face (with seven items: foundation, concealer/correctors, contour, powder, highlighter, primer, blusher), (2) Eyes (with five items: mascara, eye shadow, eyeliner, false eyelashes, brow pencil), (3) Lip (with three items: lipstick, gloss, lip contour). Using a 5-point scale (from 'never' to 'all the time'), participants are required to quantify how frequently they used the makeup items before the Covid pandemic ('pre-Covid' score) and since the start of the Covid pandemic ('since Covid' score). Using a 5-point scale from 1(none) to 5 (a lot), participants are required to quantify how much they used the makeup items before the Covid pandemic ('pre-Covid' score) and since the start of the Covid pandemic ('since Covid' score) to assess the retrospective subjective opinion on the change in the use of makeup. The Frequency score was calculated by averaging all the items in the

frequency scale (15 items) ranging from 1 (low makeup frequency) to 5 (high makeup frequency). The Quantity score was calculated by averaging all the items in the quality scale (15 items) ranging from 1 (low makeup quantity) to 5 (high makeup quantity). The sub-scores for Face, Eye and Lip makeup amount were calculated by averaging frequency and quantity for each part.

Findings. Table 3 shows the average (\pm standard deviation) and t-tests values for Make-up frequency and quantity scores before the Covid pandemic ('pre-Covid' score) and since the start of the Covid pandemic ('since Covid' score).

As can be seen from the table, there was a significant decrease in both frequency and quantity of makeup use since the start of the Covid pandemic. Thus, participants showed an overall preference for a more natural/authentic look. Thus, H2 and H3 were fully supported.

Discussion

Our research project aimed to explore and quantify the post-Covid lipstick effect. Using qualitative analysis, Study 1 **suggested a potential impact** of the first two lockdowns on fashion and beauty practices in women but not in men. Female participants spent considerable time exploring their relationship with clothes and beauty products to better align their practices with their authentic self, while male students did not change their fashion practices. While Study 2 showed that female participants chose more vivid colours and a wider range of colours as well as more pleasant textures and mobility clothes, Study 3 highlighted that female participants used a lower quantity with less frequent makeup since the beginning of the Covid pandemic.

Overall, our results suggested a ‘self-centred lipstick effect’. In fact, while market research showed increased sales of beauty products (*Business of Fashion, 2020*) – which is defined as a ‘lipstick effect’ following the economic crisis, our results underlined that participants used fewer makeup products and different clothes to better reflect their authentic selves – which we define a ‘self-centred lipstick effect’, i.e., focusing on one’s self following life crisis.

Our report confirms the relationship clothing can be used to enhance selfhood (Masuch and Hefferon, 2014; Moody et al., 2010; Nessim and Bardey, 2022). Our outcomes also confirm the use of make-up as a way of managing facial appearance anxiety, conforming to social norms and appearing more sociable and assertive to others (Korich and Pelle-de-Queral, 2008; Robertson et al., 2008). In fact, our participants mentioned using less make-up with the idea of moving away from social pressure and finding their authentic self.

Since before the Covid pandemic, the fashion and beauty industries began reconsidering marketing strategies due to changes in consumer values and behaviour – re-evaluating social media platforms for promotion or the cosmetics industry partnering with bio-medical research firms, to name two examples (*Business of Fashion, 2019*). This research found that after the lockdowns and economic repercussions of the pandemic, women, in particular, reported changes in their habits and understanding of themselves through fashion and beauty products, which is consistent with what could be expected according to both theory and trend forecasting reports (*Business of Fashion, 2020*).

While this report is the first research **suggesting** a post-Covid lipstick effect, namely the ‘self-centred lipstick effect’, further studies and observations are needed to assess any longitudinal effects consequent to the Covid lockdowns and economic fallout

or even if the results of these behavioural trends were driven by the economy or by social distancing. Also, data collection was done several months after the first and second lockdowns to allow an establishment of fashion practice changes and a longer reflection on those potential changes, but this two-time recall data collection is not as robust as an immediate recall. Further reflection on the post-crisis study methodology should be undertaken.

Funding statement. The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Ethical statement. The three studies have been approved by our institution's ethics committee.

Conflict of interest statement. The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

Acknowledgement. The authors truly thank all the participants for their time and enthusiasm.

Author Contribution statements. All the authors have contributed to the literature review, methods and results section. The first and second author have written the discussion.

References

Buentello DA, Bardey A and Rogaten J (2022) Beyond the gender dichotomy in fashion: Exploring the factors involved in cross-sexual fashion consumer behaviour for cisgender women. *Journal of Fashion Marketing and Management: An International Journal*. Epub ahead of print, 1-13. [DOI: 10.1108/JFMM-03-2022-0047](https://doi.org/10.1108/JFMM-03-2022-0047)

Braun V and Clarke V (2006) Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative research in psychology* 3(2): 77-101.

Business of Fashion (2019, November 21). The State of Fashion: 2020.

Available at

<https://www.businessoffashion.com/reports/news-analysis/the-state-of-fashion-2020-bof-mckinsey-report-release-download/>

Business of Fashion (2020, December 2). The State of Fashion: 2021. Available

at

<https://www.businessoffashion.com/reports/news-analysis/the-state-of-fashion-2021-industry-report-bof-mckinsey/>

Business of Fashion (2021, December 2). The State of Fashion: 2022. Available

at

<https://www.businessoffashion.com/reports/news-analysis/the-state-of-fashion-2022-industry-report-bof-mckinsey/>

Elliott L (2008) Into the red: 'lipstick effect' reveals the true face of the recession. The Guardian. Available at:

<https://www.theguardian.com/business/2008/dec/22/recession-cosmetics-lipstick>

Kirk CP and Rifkin LS (2020) I'll trade you diamonds for toilet paper: Consumer reacting, coping and adapting behaviors in the COVID-19 pandemic.

Journal of Business Research 117: 124–131.

Knowles J, Ettenson R, Lynch P and Dollens J (2020) Growth opportunities for brands during the COVID-19 crisis. *MIT Sloan Management Review* 61(4): 2–6.

Koch J, Frommeyer B and Schewe, G. (2020) Online shopping motives during the COVID-19 pandemic—lessons from the crisis. *Sustainability* 12(24) : 10247.

Korichi R, Pelle-de-Queral D, Gazano G and Auber A (2008) Why women use makeup: Implication of psychological. *Journal of cosmetic science* 59: 127-137.

Liu C, Xia S and Lang C (2021) Clothing consumption during the COVID-19 pandemic: evidence from mining tweets. *Clothing and Textiles Research Journal* 39(4): 314-330.

Loxton M, Truskett R, Scarf B, Sindone L, Baldry G and Zhao Y (2020) Consumer behaviour during crises: Preliminary research on how coronavirus has manifested consumer panic buying, herd mentality, changing discretionary spending and the role of the media in influencing behaviour. *Journal of Risk and Financial Management* 13(8): 166.

Martinez A and Allison M (2010) Beauty-products sales bright spot during the recession. The Seattle Times. Available at: <https://www.seattletimes.com/business/local-business/beauty-products-sales-bright-spot-during-recession/>

MacDonald D and Dildar Y (2020) Social and psychological determinants of consumption: Evidence for the lipstick effect during the Great Recession. *Journal of Behavioral and Experimental Economics* 86: 101527.

Masuch C-S and Hefferon K (2014) Understanding the links between positive psychology and fashion: A grounded theory analysis. *International Journal of Fashion Studies* 1(2): 227–246.

Moody W, Kinderman P and Sinha P (2010) An exploratory study: Relationships between trying on clothing, mood, emotion, personality and clothing preference. *Journal Of Fashion Marketing and Management: An International Journal* 14(1): 161–179.

Naeem M (2021) Do social media platforms develop consumer panic buying during the fear of Covid-19 pandemic. *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services* 58: 102226.

Nessim Y and Bardey A (2022). *The rise of female empowerment in Egypt: The fashion psychology behind their attire and armour*. Fashion Marketing in Emerging Economies. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Robertson J, Fieldman G and Hussey T (2008) " Who wears Cosmetics?" Individual Differences and their Relationship with Cosmetic Usage. *Individual Differences Research* 6(1): 38-56.

Statista (2021). Cosmetic industry growth | Statista. Available at: <http://www.statista.com/statistics/297070/growth-rate-of-the-global-cosmetics-market/>