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From aesthetic labour to affective labour: feminine beauty and body work as self-care in UK 'lockdown'

Rachel Wood

School of Humanities, Keele University, Keele, Staffordshire, UK

ABSTRACT

This paper draws on qualitative survey and interview data with 72 participants focusing on feminine body and beauty work practices in the UK's first Covid-19 'lockdown' in 2020. The data suggest that the *affective* dimensions of beauty were intensified, accelerated, and expanded during this period. Feminine beauty and body work was deployed to produce desired affects: namely positivity, productivity, and the elimination of stress and anxiety. I argue, therefore, that beauty practices became oriented less around aesthetic labour – the work of improving and maintaining appearance – and more explicitly and substantially a project of affective labour – the deep feeling work of generating and maintaining a disposition that aligns with the needs of capital. Using the lens of affective labour provides insight into the way that the affective harms of the pandemic crisis were individualised and managed by feminine selves through practices of beauty and body work. Participants' affective labour projects produced two interrelated sets of immaterial outcomes. First, they helped maintain a 'market ready' set of positive and productive dispositions that were particularly crucial for those subjects in heightened conditions of precarity, insecurity or isolation. Second, affective labour was key to the deeply gendered, racialised and classed moral formulation of the 'good' pandemic citizen who would, and could, follow the directive to 'stay at home' in order not only to care for themselves and others, but to use the 'opportunity' of lockdown to transform and improve the self.

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Introduction

In March 2020, the UK government told people in England to 'stay at home' to curtail the spread of the Covid-19 virus (Johnson 2020a). The UK's pandemic response has been riddled with practical, ideological, and political

CONTACT Rachel Wood r.m.wood@keele.ac.uk School of Humanities, Keele University, Keele, Staffordshire ST5 5BG, UK.

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limitations (Preston and Firth, 2020), deepening already stark inequalities following a decade of austerity governance (Fuchs, 2021). Many workers, including those not in essential sectors, were expected to continue to work outside the home under unsafe or deadly conditions (Hoad 2020). Even for those able to work from home – less than half of the employed UK population (Felstead and Reuschke 2020) – significant inequalities emerged surrounding access to indoor and outdoor space, caring responsibilities, mental health, violence in the home, and the racialised policing of 'lockdown rulebreakers' (Benson 2020). Unsurprisingly, celebrity and lifestyle media largely elided these issues to centre a narrative of restriction to mobility and social consumption, presenting a plethora of advice and diversions to occupy the minds and time of affluent middle-class home-bound consumers (Kay, 2020). Lifestyle websites offered tips on 'DIY' beauty treatments (Teich 2020; Hughes, 2020; Lukas 2020) to try 'now that you've got the time' (Neibart 2020), suggested ideas and products for at home 'self-care' spa days (Simmons 2020), and provided advice on how to lose weight 'even in lockdown' (Harris 2020; Bee 2020).

Recent scholarship has analysed how media communications have framed the pandemic crisis (Orgad and Hegde 2022; Sobande 2020; Sobande and Klein 2022; Martínez-Jiménez 2022; Gill and Orgad 2022). These analyses identify a 'self-care imperative' (Orgad and Hegde 2022) whereby subjects were made responsible for caring for themselves at home in the context of a 'crisis of care' in the pandemic (Chatzidakis at al., 2020). This devolution of care in the crisis to resilient and flexible individuals represents a continuation and acceleration of decades of neoliberal and austerity governance that has relied upon the entrepreneurial subject to self-govern and self-care in conditions of continued precarity and diminishing resources (Wilson and Yochim 2015). The pandemic 'good citizen' was one who could self-sufficiently resource all their mental and physical care needs from within the atomised household (Benson 2020). This moral formulation is fundamentally gendered (Orgad and Hegde 2022) and marked as white, middle-class, and heteronormative (Benson 2020).

This paper seeks to explore how this 'self-care imperative' was taken up and worked upon through the deployment of feminine beauty and body work practices during the UK's first 'lockdown' in 2020, drawing on qualitative survey and interview data from 72 participants. My use of 'lockdown' throughout this paper as a catch all for government restrictions is not to overlook valid critiques of the term for playing a role in obscuring the deeply unequal power dynamics of the pandemic (Hoad 2020). The ubiquitous vernacular use of 'lockdown' in the UK was deployed by research participants to speak to the impact that pandemic related changes had on their daily lives. Respondents to the research were the target audience of the kind of lifestyle advice referred to above: predominantly white middle class professionals

and students aged from 19 to 55. These subjects were all materially secure, though many experienced heightened forms of precarity or social vulnerability, for example through sudden job loss or living alone during lockdown. For all participants, the government instruction to 'stay at home' brought about a radical, sudden, and wholescale transformation of daily life.

The paper argues that the *affective* dimensions of beauty were intensified, accelerated, and expanded over this period. Beauty and body work practices during lockdown – from skincare and fitness to diet, make-up, hair care, and nails – were framed as primarily, even exclusively, beneficial for how they made the subject *feel* rather than look. I argue, therefore, that practices in lockdown became oriented less around aesthetic labour – the work of improving and maintaining appearance, with a significant psychic dimension – and more explicitly and substantially a project of affective labour – the deep feeling work of generating and maintaining a gendered, racialised and classed disposition that aligns with the needs of capital.

In part, the transition to affective labour charted in this paper is merely an acceleration of the psychic, affective dimensions that have already been identified as central to aesthetic labour under neoliberalism (Elias et al. 2017). By theorising these practices explicitly as *affective* labour, however, the paper attends to the way that the positive and productive 'feeling rules' of neoliberal capitalism were discursively re-calibrated by the crisis, and how this was managed through the everyday beauty practices of subjects in lockdown. The 'structure of feeling' (Williams, 2015) of the pandemic involved the devolution of responsibility to the individual: to retreat to the safety of the home and to resource all their care needs from within that space. It was not enough merely to survive under these conditions, entrepreneurial subjects were expected to *thrive*: to keep bad feelings at bay and maintain a positive frame of mind, to use their time productively, and even to use the 'opportunity' of lockdown to reflect upon, improve, and transform themselves for the better (Gill and Orgad 2022).

The analysis reveals how research participants took up these affective imperatives and used feminine beauty and body work techniques in various ways to work upon them. Participants' affective labour projects produced two interrelated sets of immaterial outcomes. First, they helped maintain a 'market ready' set of positive and productive dispositions that were particularly crucial for those subjects in heightened conditions of precarity and insecurity. Second, affective labour was key to the deeply gendered, racialised and classed moral formulation of the 'good' pandemic citizen (Benson 2020) who would, and could, follow the directive to 'stay at home' in order to care for themselves and others.

In the following section, I outline the hegemonies of pandemic governance that provide socio-political context for participants' affective labour projects, before setting out the theoretical frameworks of aesthetic and

affective labour. After describing the research methodology, the analysis turns to themes of (self)surveillance and self-transformation, exploring how participants' experiences of not being 'seen' outside the home and using the 'opportunity' of lockdown to improve and transform the self are reflective of their largely white and middle-class social positions. In the final section, I examine the nature of participants' affective labour projects and argue that it is precisely the ever more flexible and resourceful work of subjects to care for and govern the self in precarious circumstances that allows a system of advanced neoliberal governing through insecurity to persist and worsen (Lorey, 2015).

Governing the crisis: the 'good' pandemic citizen

It is useful to see the pandemic not as a singular crisis but as part of a longer, protracted 'unravelling' of the social order after decades of neoliberal capitalism (Ang 2021). Neoliberal rule is underpinned by market rationalities that help produce notions of the self as entrepreneurial and self-actualising (Brown 2003). The state contracts in terms of social support while expanding its carceral and surveillance powers (Gilmore 2017). In an era of neoliberal austerity or 'advanced neoliberalism' following the 2008 financial crisis, tools of resilience and individual responsibility are increasingly relied upon simply to survive and 'keep things going' with ever shrinking resources (Wilson and Yochim 2015).

Neoliberalism has underpinned the 'normalisation' of precarity, not merely as a tool for capitalist accumulation, but as a form of governance (Lorey, 2015). Austerity and now the pandemic have dealt out harm according to structural inequalities related to gender, race, class, and disability, and further deepened them. Bambra et al. (2021, xiv) describe Covid-19 as a 'syndemic', a co-occurring, synergistic pandemic of disease and inequality that has 'killed unequally, been experienced unequally and will impoverish unequally'.

The UK government has been far from alone, however, in implementing pandemic policy and public messaging that obscured these structural disparities in favour of a neoliberal discourse of self-responsibility (Orgad and Hegde 2022). The formulation of the pandemic 'good citizen' meant that individuals became morally and socially responsibilised for taking actions to stop the spread of the virus (Benson 2020). This allowed governments to continue to abdicate responsibility for those for whom it was impossible to carry out these acts of 'good citizenship' for any number of systemic reasons (Orgad and Hegde 2022; Wilson 2021), while punishing any lack of compliance and framing it as ignorant, reckless, selfish, or criminal (Benson 2020; Williams et al., 2021; Preston and Firth, 2020)

Neoliberal governments have seen their primary responsibility to be one of instructing citizens about not only their actions but their feelings of

responsibility for managing the crisis (Orgad and Hegde 2022). This pandemic 'structure of feeling' (Williams, 2015) is a continuation of that under neoliberal austerity (Hakim, 2019). While anxiety is the 'dominant mood of our age' (Murray, 2019, 48), individualised psychological wellbeing solutions are routinely the only cure imagined possible. This reflects the 'psychological turn' in neoliberal rationalities through the 2010s, where 'neoliberal feeling rules' operate through the governance of positive affects (Gill and Kanai 2019, 132) to the extent that Binkley (2014) describes happiness as the 'hinge' of neoliberal governance.

Throughout the pandemic, calls to think positive and work on wellbeing have proliferated in women's lifestyle media (Martínez-Jiménez 2022; Gill and Orgad 2022). Gill and Orgad (2022, 6) examine advice that recasts the pandemic as an opportunity for personal growth and development. Women are framed as natural care-givers to themselves and others (Martínez-Jiménez 2022), who must resourcefully take on the project of managing the self, home and family against the worry, unpredictability, and vulnerability of everyday life (Wilson and Yochim 2015). The pandemic 'good citizen', then, is the model of moral hegemonic femininity, who unquestioningly takes on responsibility for a pandemic care burden that encompasses the nation, the household, and herself.

From aesthetic labour to affective labour

Notably for this paper, beauty and body work techniques have been central to the self-care regimes advocated in women's lockdown lifestyle media, conflating affective wellbeing with participating in beauty and body work and a normative aesthetic of femininity (Martínez-Jiménez 2022; Gill and Orgad 2022). This section outlines the concepts of aesthetic and affective labour in order to frame the papers' central contention that the pandemic has accelerated the affective components of work on the body and appearance.

Over the past two decades, theorisations of beauty and body cultures have evidenced a 'turn to labour' (Elias et al. 2017), focusing on the way that regimes of appearance work serve to produce subjects who align with the imperatives of neoliberal capitalism. As Mears (2014) summarises, aesthetic labour was first outlined by sociologists of work and organisation in the early 2000s, bringing together frameworks of beauty and body work with Hochschild's (1983) model of emotional labour. Elias, Gill and Scharff (2017, 5) extend the concept beyond the realm of paid employment, seeing it as a central imperative within broader rationalities of self-work in neoliberalism 'with its relentless exhortation to be active, entrepreneurial, self-optimising'. Scholarship emphasises the affective dimension of aesthetic labour as it is deployed to produce 'qualities such as confidence, happiness and authenticity' (Elias et al., 5).

Affective labour, on the other hand, is theorised by Hardt (1999, 96) as a core element of immaterial labour where workers cultivate feelings of 'ease, well-being, satisfaction, excitement, passion – even a sense of connected-ness or community'. Much like aesthetic labour, recent theorisations of affective labour have emphasised its ubiquity beyond the workplace (Veldstra 2020, 7). In this formulation, affective labour involves the shaping of the self – one's feelings, self-expressions, relationships, interests, and character – to deeply align with notions of economic value and the needs of capital (Woodcock 2019). Through affective labour the crisis and harms of capital become individualised; meaning that feelings of anxiety, precarity and dissatisfaction become personal problems of 'attitude to be remedied through more careful emotional tailoring' (Veldstra 2020, 12).

The shaping of the self around the generation of economically valued affects draws heavily on practices and processes of the body (Hardt 1999; Oksala 2016). While affective labour has not been explicitly theorised in relation to feminine beauty and body work, a strong connection can be found in the 'self-care imperative' (Orgad and Hedge, 2022) explored above. Even before the pandemic, the widespread appeal of wellness spoke to the deep desire and need for stability and control felt by many under conditions of precarity and crisis (O'Neill 2021). The acceleration of self-care discourse during the pandemic – aimed at women and focusing in large part on practices of beauty and body work and consumption (Martínez-Jiménez 2022; Gill and Orgad 2022) – speaks to a further reliance on the feminised subject to take up responsibility for a critical deficit of care under conditions of advanced neoliberal governance.

This research sought to understand how subjects in lockdown were participating in beauty and body work, and how the outcomes of such practices were being conceived – whether for the purposes of aesthetic beautification or affective self-care and self-improvement, or as both or neither. The analysis points to an intensification of the affective dimensions of beauty and body work, with this labour taking on a profoundly *moral* dimension in the context of the self-care imperative for pandemic 'good citizens' outlined above.

It is important, however, that this paper does not suggest affective responses to the pandemic have been wholly bound by neoliberal rationalities of labour. Oksala (2016) cautions against the tendency in some theorisations of affective labour to establish a closed off assessment of emotional life, reflected in Hardt's (1999) description of 'human relations entirely dominated by and internal to capital'. Such a conceptualisation shuts down the possibility for resistance through practices of 'care, solidarity, and justice' (Oksala 2016, 289) which have also been evident throughout the pandemic (Preston and Firth, 2020). With this paper, I do not wish to offer an 'overly rationalised' account of neoliberal gendered selves, and instead retain an openness to 'fractures and contradictions' in pandemic

self-help discourses and experiences (Gill and Orgad 2022), a point to which I return in the conclusion.

Methodology

The following analysis draws on 72 responses to a qualitative survey and 11 follow up semi-structured one-to-one interviews. The survey sought the participation of anyone who regularly did things to work on their feminine appearance, including activities such as grooming, make-up, skincare, hair styling, nails, body hair removal, diet and exercise, and clothing. The survey was qualitative in nature, aiming to capture data about the experiences and feelings of respondents. Survey questions elicited open text-box answers on topics such as beauty and body work practices before and after the start of lockdown, what had changed, and how participants felt about these changes. Follow up interviews were conducted remotely via video call with those who volunteered. Survey and interview data was then coded using thematic analysis (Clarke and Braun, 2021).

Participation was limited to those residing in the UK in order that respondents were all living under comparable levels of government restriction. The research was designed following the instruction issued on March 23rd, 2020, from the UK Prime Minister for the public in England to leave home only for very limited purposes (Johnson 2020a). Similar instructions were issued in the devolved nations of the UK, with some variations in timing and detail. These restrictions remained largely unchanged by May when survey responses were collected. There had been an easing of some restrictions by the period in June 2020 when the interviews were held, such as the opening of non-essential retail and limited outdoor socialising (Johnson 2020b).

Participants were recruited via social media including the researcher's Twitter account and Facebook groups dedicated to beauty interests. The use of a convenience sample based on existing online social networks does mean that there are significant limitations to the diversity of respondents. Respondents to the survey were aged between 19 and 55 with the highest proportion in their twenties and thirties; 67 of the 72 respondents were white; most participants were in professional jobs or in higher education, although a significant minority were unemployed or placed on the government furlough scheme which provided partial pay for some workers whose work could not continue during lockdown (HM Revenue and Customs 2020). Though the survey sought responses from people of any gender, participants were almost all women with two non-binary respondents; and around half of participants identified as bisexual, lesbian, or queer with the rest being heterosexual. Respondents were living either alone, with parents, a partner, or housemate(s). While 10 of the survey participants lived with their children, none of those who volunteered for a follow-up interview did, perhaps

reflecting a lack of time to participate for those with children when schools and childcare were not available. Most respondents, then, were in social positions which meant they spent most of their time during lockdown in the home in relative levels of safety and comfort.

As Gill (2021) notes, too many research projects, particularly in the realm of beauty and body image, focus on the experience of white, middle class, young, cisgender, non-disabled women, a critique that undoubtedly applies here. The participants were predominantly the white and middle-class subjects of address of the pandemic 'self-care' advice described in recent research (Martínez-Jiménez 2022; Gill and Orgad 2022). This project therefore provides an interesting point of comparison to pre-pandemic research exploring the beauty and body work practices of socially privileged subjects. However, the analysis seeks to acknowledge the nature of the sample by theorising the experiences of participants not as universal, but as representative of a particular racialised and class position (Tate, 2017, 4). Respondents' accounts speak to the experience of taking up and striving to embody the moral position of the pandemic 'good citizen', who takes responsibility for the affective labour project of caring for herself under rapidly transformed and uncertain conditions. Feminine beauty and body work practices played a key role in this affective labour project.

'I don't get seen as much by others': staying at home and (self) surveillance

Given the relative social privilege of the subjects whose accounts make up the data, for most participants lockdown meant that the home suddenly transformed into the 'supra-locale' of the everyday (Fuchs, 2021). Surveys and interviews referred to a resulting reduction of beauty and body work practices such as make-up use, hair washing and styling and body hair removal. In the quotes below, survey respondents explain this shift by referring to being 'seen' less by others:

> Haven't done any make up since the start of lock down as I feel like it would be a waste of product, and no one is really seeing my face to notice.

> As I am now working from home, I put less effort into my outfits since I am not going to be seen by anyone other than myself and my family.

This reported sense of being 'seen' less did not necessarily involve a reduction in beauty practices. Interviewee Julie (37) spoke about wearing colourful make-up and revealing clothing that she would ordinarily worry was 'too much' for work, while a survey respondent wrote about bleaching their hair: 'it seemed like the lowest risk time'. Both sets of responses suggest that lockdown may have provided a perceived break from at least some of the surveillance and appearance 'rules' ordinarily expected as part of day-to-day life as it was lived outside the home.

Feminist geographies have long troubled the notion of home as a 'private' space in a public/private binary, emphasising that the home is constructed by social relations that extend beyond it (Massey, cited in Johnson 2017). While avoiding the reification of this binary, it is possible to identify regimes of gendered surveillance that may remain at their most intensified in spaces outside the home (Johnson 2017; Elias, forthcoming, cited in Gill 2021). The home may be understood affectively as a space of comfort and retreat from surveillance, even as it remains a space deeply shaped by power relations (Johnson 2017).

The home also became a space loaded with *moral* significance during lockdown (Kay, 2020; Orgad and Hedge, 2022). The notion of home as a space of retreat constructed in these accounts draws on the gendered, racialised, and classed moral framework of the pandemic 'good citizen'. The experience of reprieve, of not being 'seen' by others, reflects the ability of respondents to retreat to the home. By contrast, those who were unable to 'stay at home' for a wide range of reasons risked becoming subject to significantly expanded surveillance and policing powers implemented by the UK government during the pandemic, impacting most heavily on racialised, working class and other marginalised groups (Williams et al., 2021).

The narrative of reprieve also points to the mobility of participants' lives *before* the pandemic, such that lockdown represented a significant spatial and social transformation of the everyday. As the response of a survey participant with chronic pain highlights, the disruption of lockdown was not novel for all: 'my health has always dictated my ability to groom and style myself, and lockdown has affected me in a similar way'. In contrast, other participants compared lockdown to leisure or consumption spaces they were familiar with in which appearance standards might temporarily become more relaxed, such as camping, beach holidays, or music festivals. This points to the levels of mobility experienced by most participants before the pandemic, but these were not universally shared, just as the experience of reprieve from being 'seen' by others is a reflection of the race and class position of most of the participants.

The reprieve narrative was accompanied by discussion of intensified *self*-surveillance via video calls. For participants working, learning, and socialising from home, video calls became a new arena for social self-presentation, and related self-scrutiny:

> I think it is just the amount of time I'm spending looking at my own face on the screen (Ann, 34)

> I think I'm more aware of what my face and hair looks like than I would have ever been (Kate, 31)

Other interview participants took steps to work on appearance via video call in particular contexts. Julie followed a YouTube guide on setting up her

kit to 'not look gross', and Jess took time to stage angles and lighting when 'Zoom dating'. Elias and Gill (2018) note that screen technologies mark the intensification, extensification, and psychologization of a regulatory gaze for femininised subjects, a process that, from these accounts, appears was further exacerbated by the ubiquity of video call interactions in lockdown. On the other hand, some respondents referred to the emergence of a new social consensus surrounding feminine appearance standards over video calls. An interviewee explained how this emerged in work meetings:

'I kind of feel like everyone else is kind of dressing down… So you feel a bit more justified in not making as much effort either… the ladies who are usually really glamorous and in their power outfits and stuff, they were there in hoodies with their hair scraped back, and clearly not a drop of make-up on. And I thought, "Well if they are, then it's clearly alright for me too."' (Ann, 34)

In a similar way to survey respondents who wrote that make-up on video calls was not as 'necessary now' or that 'everyone understands if you don't look your best', Ann's account suggests that aesthetic labour 'rules', in both professional and non-professional contexts, shifted for video calls during lockdown. This sense that it was 'alright' to 'dress down' during lockdown because 'everyone understands' raises the question of who may or may not be included as part of this shifting consensus. Tate (2017, 22) argues that judgements of appearance, 'body rules', have a moral dimension, 'body values', that is inherently linked to the normalisation of a beauty standard that 'in the Global North West is always able-bodied, racialized as white, cis-gendered, straight, young, slim, straight-haired and middle class/elite' (22). The relaxation of body rules and body values in the context of lockdown, including on video calls, then, reflects the positionality of participants within the boundaries of this normalised standard around which a new emerging consensus was constructed.

'I'm trying to use the opportunity': aesthetic and affective self-transformation

Although some beauty practices were reduced, it would not be correct to state that participants were no longer undertaking aesthetic labour. For some, it appears that the temporal dimensions of aesthetic labour shifted from the day-to-day to the long term. A 'break' or 'breather' in beauty practices was framed as an opportunity for skin and hair to 'rest' and thus improve in appearance:

> I rarely style my hair now… I am hoping letting my hair rest during this time will help encourage regrowth as have been losing hair due to nutrition and stress in last year.

> I've been buying lots of skincare products as am not wearing makeup so want to try and improve my overall skin.

> I have started using more face masks and beauty treatments that take longer like hair masks and foot masks.

These responses suggest that participants are still taking part in multiple forms of aesthetic labour, but this work has been temporally re-oriented with less expectation of immediate 'results'. There is an implicit critique here of the exacting, time-consuming, and stressful beauty maintenance routines of pre-lockdown lives. Equally, we might read these 'long-term' projects as an extension of the time maximising practices cultivated by neoliberal beauty cultures (Gill 2021). Dosekun (2017) describes practices of 'aesthetic rest', whereby subjects take strategic break periods from the detriments of hyper-feminine beauty practices, in order to 'better withstand' the continued use of these technologies.

These accounts may well be oriented towards the more successful redeployment of beauty practices in the future, as in the respondent who wrote that 'it would be good for my hair to have a break from bleaching'. Other accounts, however, suggest that the aim is to stop some beauty practices altogether, as a survey response stated: 'I'm trying to use the opportunity to get my skin to a place where I don't feel I need make-up to hide imperfections'. Similarly, interviewee Beth (24) explained that 'I just decided that this was the time for me to try and learn to be comfortable and okay with my bare skin'. This suggests that the 'aesthetic rest' (Dosekun, 2017) being undertaken in this case forms part of an *affective* project of mentally adjusting to, accepting, and appreciating the appearance without the use of beauty modifications that were previously routine. This was expressed through the idea of getting used to one's 'natural' appearance by some respondents:

> Initially I was unhappy that I couldn't maintain certain things, in particular my pubic hair and my eyebrow shape. However, I very quickly have got used to both being more 'natural'.

> I feel quite liberated by not wearing any make-up, and I have gotten used to seeing my face without it. I think I like my 'natural' face more now that I did before March.

> I am really happy that I've gotten in touch with my natural beauty, and I feel like it's lifted my self-esteem HUGELY.

'Natural beauty' has long held associations of white, middle class respectable femininity, implicitly defined against 'over the top' excessive working class and/or racialised femininities (McCann 2015, 2020). The natural/artificial beauty binary is constructed around taste judgements, and as such is loaded with affective significance related to pride, shame, and authenticity (Tate, 2016). Female body hair, as mentioned in the first survey quote above, is particularly loaded with a range of feelings from disgust and hostility to resistance (Fahs 2011). The commodified iconography of 'natural' or 'real' beauty has been central to the neoliberal imperative for women to work

upon and improve their confidence (Orgad and Gill, 2021), as the final quote about 'boosting self-esteem' above suggests.

A number of critics have pointed to the rise of popular feminism in recent years that incorporates neoliberal notions of individual responsibility into a critique of gender inequality (see Banet-Weiser, Rosalind, and Catherine 2020). Feminine bodily presentation has become overburdened in this popular feminist discourse with individualised notions of 'success' or 'failure' (McCann 2020), with responsibility placed on individual women to do the mental work of undoing and resisting unrealistic beauty pressures (Orgad and Gill, 2021). In line with these popular feminist ideas, some respondents articulated their adjustment to 'natural' appearance as a critique of, and liberation from, unreasonable beauty 'pressure and expectations' places on women:

> I've distanced myself from trying to attain feminine beauty… I feel better as I hate all the pressure to conform to ridiculous torturous beauty treatments and think it's unrealistic.

The accounts in this section show a critical relationship to gendered aesthetic labour expectations, but ultimately it appears that the only solutions available are individualised ones. Whether re-orienting beauty practices to long-term goals, working on finding confidence in 'natural' beauty, or (temporarily) liberating oneself from societal beauty expectations, participants draw upon on pandemic discourses of lockdown as a space of self-improvement, self-transformation, and self-reflection (Gill and Orgad 2022). In so doing, they draw upon the pandemic structure of feeling, in which responsibility for managing the material and affective dimensions of the crisis must be taken up by the gendered, racialised and classed 'good citizen' in order not only to care for the self but to 'make the most of' lockdown. This framing of pandemic restrictions as an 'opportunity' to transform the self can be starkly set against the levels of exploitation, social harm, and loss of life that have fallen hardest on racialised, working class, disabled, and other marginalised groups (Preston and Firth, 2020).

'I've shifted to doing things that make me feel good': affective labour

Affective labour in lockdown involved using beauty and body work to generate feelings of productivity, positivity, and mental wellbeing, while also staving off unwanted negative affects including anxiety, stress, and loss of control. Survey respondents wrote about the need to 'create a sense of normality' and 'feel much more positive… in the current situation'. It is perhaps not a coincidence that the interviewees whose accounts are examined in this section are some of those who experienced the greatest economic

and social precarity at the start of the pandemic response in March 2020. These include Beth (24), who was placed on the government's partial pay furlough scheme, Jess (28), who experienced sudden job loss, Lucy (31), who was living alone, and Amy (25), who lost employment as a freelance cultural worker in London and moved to her parental home. While they were able to take up the position of pandemic 'good citizens' and follow the imperative to care for themselves, it seems that these participants had to work particularly hard to stave off the feelings of precarity, insecurity, worry, and isolation arising from their situations. This kind of resourcefulness of the feminine subject to take up the care burden in precarious circumstances is precisely what comes to 'underwrite precarization and make it possible' (Wilson and Yochim 2015, 22).

Affective labour enables subjects to 'keep going' under challenging conditions (Veldstra 2020) in a way that ultimately helps prop up the structural devolution of responsibility for crisis management to the realm of individual self-care. Lucy's discussion of doing her nails 'just for wellbeing' explored the therapeutic role that feminine beauty work could play in lockdown:

> It just helps you get rid of all the other thoughts that might be worrying you or stressing you out. That's why I find it quite relaxing… Having them look nice afterwards gives you a prolonged, "Oh, your nails look good. That's better," but the actual act of doing it is more therapeutic than having them done. (Lucy, 31)

Affective labour demands the subordination – or in Lucy's words getting rid of – unwanted affects, in this case worry and stress (Veldstra 2020). Particularly at the start of the pandemic in the UK, the social needs of those living alone like Lucy were not considered in policy making and messaging which was addressed to the normative self-contained familial 'household' (Orgad and Hegde 2022). Lucy therefore draws on her own resources, which include feminine beauty practices, to care for her wellbeing in isolated conditions.

One interviewee neatly summed up the way in which working on appearance was deployed as part of an affective labour project in lockdown:

> Or some days, if I'm having a bit of a lazy, demotivated day, I'll perhaps put on some makeup and put on a bit of a nicer outfit, which I think a lot of people have been doing that to try and boost yourself and cheer yourself up… I'd say that in lockdown I've, kind of, shifted away from doing things to make me look outwardly nice, to, like, I've shifted to doing things that make me feel good. (Naomi, 22)

In this statement, feeling 'lazy' and 'demotivated' is solved through being 'cheered up' by makeup and an outfit. This is just one example of the way that *productivity* and *positivity* were often conflated in participants' accounts. Beth discussed how 'the loss of routine for me has been hard' while on furlough and described a morning routine implemented to address this:

> Exercise is the first thing I do… [then I get] ready for the day and then I'd be at the desk wearing a proper outfit, ready to do something productive with that time. (Beth, 24)

This routine gave Beth 'some sense of structure and, I don't know, success… I'm not just existing'". This notion, that to 'just exist' would represent failure, points to the powerful *moral* imperative placed on the 'good citizen' to feel useful, successful, and productive in lockdown. The need to avoid lethargy was also evident in Jess' description of developing a routine with a housemate in response to job loss:

> We, very early on, said that we didn't want to turn it into a 'pillow fort' house, where we were just going to sink into lethargy and eat all the junk and everything. So, we very actively chose to have very nutritious, colourful meals and work out to try and keep positive. (Jess, 28)

The collapsing of productivity and positivity in these accounts can be understood best through the lens of affective labour, which involves the privileging of 'profitable affects' and the privatisation and disavowal of 'less profitable' negative feelings (Veldstra 2020, 7). The intangible and immaterial products of affective labour are directly exploitable by capital (Hardt 1999, 90). Even while Beth and Jess are furloughed and unemployed, respectively, they deliberately maintain a market ready way of living that is productive, healthy, structured, and optimistic.

Similarly, Amy described skincare as giving 'a sense of control and routine… helpful in settling your mind'. Recent skincare manuals published in the self-help genre, such as *Skincare for Your Soul* (Chao, 2021) and *Glow from Within* (Vargas, 2020), emphasise skincare as a path not only to clear and youthful skin, but to developing self-care habits and managing mental health. In the context of sudden unemployment Amy framed the project of researching, building, and maintaining a skincare routine as key to generating feelings of productivity and progress:

> Skincare, specifically, has always been something I've wanted to understand but felt as if I needed time to sit down and learn what all these bloody ingredients were… Losing a job has given me time to be like, 'Right, I need to occupy myself somehow and learn something new'… To feel like I'm using that time productively.

Connected to that – And I think the most important point actually, in terms of my own mental health, is that because of the changing work circumstances – Having something like skincare… it does make me feel like I'm doing something useful.

Although I'm not progressing in my career right now, there is something I'm doing for myself and for nobody else. You know, this is for me. It feels like I'm doing something worthwhile and something that future [Amy] will be glad that she invested the time and the energy and, let's say, a little bit of money as well, into looking after your skin and keeping you sane. You know,

it's something for you to do and you can see positive progress which is not something I've seen in my career in the last couple of months. (Amy, 25)

Here skincare is operating not only as a form of affective labour in the sense of generating feelings of wellbeing and productivity, but also as an *investment* in the project of the self that Amy hopes will pay off now and in the future. As a precarious, freelance worker Amy was not protected by the piecemeal UK government support for workers, relying instead on the support of the middle-class family. That she directly frames skincare as a replacement for the sense of reward and self-improvement she might otherwise seek from work reflects the way that affective labour frames 'career' as 'a vocabulary for talking about the cultivation of the self' (Farrugia 2021, 14).

As a young white middle-class woman and freelance cultural worker, Amy is doubly interpolated as the ideal entrepreneurial subject of neoliberalism (Scharff 2016). Her account exemplifies the way in which the contradictions and harms at the heart of precarious work in the contemporary economy, heightened and laid bare by the pandemic response, were individualised and managed affectively by the entrepreneurial feminine subject in lockdown. The immaterial outcomes of Amy's affective labour – feelings of productivity, success, and being cared for – stand ready to become once again exploitable by the precaritised cultural industry in which she works. The powerful framing of lockdown as an opportunity for self-improvement, self-transformation, and self-investment for normative feminine subjects (Gill and Orgad 2022) therefore serves to support the persistence and normalisation of a system of precarity that continues to exploit their labour (Lorey, 2015).

As Lorey (2015) shows, governing through insecurity involves the maintenance of state support at a level that is 'just tolerable'. As precarity becomes ever more normalised and ubiquitous, subjects must delve deeper to survive by proactively governing and caring for themselves (Wilson and Yochim 2015). This not only *optimises* precarity as a form of governance through enhancing the tolerability of the minimal state, but also legitimates the further neglect and blame of those without access to the resources needed to survive. This resourcefulness of subjects to care for themselves only serves to optimise harmful insecure conditions, paving the way for 'just tolerable' levels of security to descend still further.

Conclusion

Understanding feminine beauty and body work practices through the lens of affective labour provides insight into the way that the affective (and material) harms of the pandemic crisis – and its (mis)management by the state and market – have been individualised and managed by feminine selves through practices of beauty and body work. Affective labour allowed subjects with the resources to do so to derive their mental and embodied

care needs from within the atomised home. All participants, but particularly those in more challenging and precarious conditions, worked intensively to stave off feelings of anxiety and fear, and maintain a market ready set of productive and positive affects that ultimately help to support the normalisation of precarity. The analysis has shown that affective labour produces immaterial outcomes that are not only exploitable by capital, but also contribute to the powerful *moral* framing of the 'good' pandemic citizen who not only survives but thrives in crisis conditions, caring for and improving the self in ways that are both positive and productive. Although structural social inequalities shape the ability of citizens to care from themselves in this way, the moral formulation of the good pandemic subject serves to obscure these gendered, racialised and classed disparities while further intensifying a self-care imperative deeply imbued with normative ideals of middle-class, heteronormative femininity. The governance of the pandemic points to the ways in which the protracted crises of advanced neoliberalism (Ang 2021) are likely to continue to be managed through the devolution of care to normative feminine entrepreneurial subjects.

As argued above, it would be reductive to portray participants' accounts as hopelessly occupied by neoliberal rationalities of the self-optimising subject. Elsewhere in the data, participants recognised the inequalities and injustices of the pandemic by, for example, expressing feelings of care and concern for beauty workers such as hairdressers and nail technicians, most of whom were not financially supported during lockdown. Some participants paid for remote or pre-pay services in limited individual attempts to plug huge structural gaps in support for beauty workers.

The data also attest to the immutably *social* nature of self-presentation, through which people may communicate or affirm their identities and celebrate social connections in ways that generate joy. As interviewee Kate (31) explained: 'I also miss wearing my best clothes, as these were an expression of fun… I am starting to really long for the social feedback that comes from going out'. The practice of 'dressing up' can be joyful, social, communal, and collaborative (Cahill 2003), and lockdown also involved feelings of loss and longing for some of these social pleasures associated with beauty and body work practices. On the other hand, while I have framed the analysis through the transition from aesthetic to affective labour, some of the data presented points to a reduction of beauty and body work practices that, at least for some, appears to have been understood as a reprieve or even a liberation, however temporary, from forms of feminised embodied and emotional work.

Finally, the data illustrate how subjects make do with and manage the depleted affective conditions under which they live. Faced with heightened precarity, uncertainty, anxiety, and fear in lockdown, participants sought to care for themselves in the ways that were available and made sense to them. Imperatives of self-care have been embraced by neoliberal governmentality

as part of the project of devolving responsibility for health and wellbeing to individuals (Frayne 2019). However, self-care has long been fundamental for survival among those who have been failed to be cared for by the state or by institutions (Ward 2015). Discourses and practices of self-care need not necessarily be at odds with the understanding that wide-scale structural solutions are ultimately what is needed to begin to redress the substantial affective harms of our age (Frayne 2019).

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Notes on contributor

Rachel Wood is a Senior Lecturer in Media at Keele University, UK. Her research examines mediated femininities in digital consumer culture. Her recent work has explored ethical and anti-consumerism on beauty YouTube, and the affective labour of beauty and body work in lockdown. Her current research centres on the labour of zero waste sustainability influencers on Instagram, exploring the challenges faced by content creators in communicating ideas about sustainable consumption on a consumer centric platform. Her work has been published in journals including New Media and Society, Cultural Studies, and Feminist Media Studies, and she is the author of the Routledge monograph Consumer Sexualities: Women and Sex Shopping.

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