

How The Pandemic Redefined Beauty By Grace Vance

It was a balmy 80 degree afternoon in June when I ventured outside for my favorite activity of the day: a long, head clearing, wave-to-your-neighbors kind of walk. My ensemble of black leggings, a t-shirt and sneakers was the most dressed up I had been so far that week, and with my hair up and face makeup free, I was also at my most comfortable. It was at that moment as I walked through my neighborhood's nature sanctuary with moms whizzing past me as they jogged with baby strollers that the realization hit me. Going barefaced had become more routine for me than ever before, but it was also a habit I could not have imagined before the pandemic.

Back in February, most mornings I would get up around 6:30 a.m. to give myself enough time to get dressed, eat breakfast and become presentable for my 8 a.m. class. I would remain on campus for upwards of 16 hours, camping out in the journalism school between classes to discuss stories and meet with editors. My new, decidedly pared down lifestyle consisted of sleeping in when I could, staying inside to work on school assignments and playing with my cats, who became my temporary coworkers.

With my previous in-person responsibilities now online, I found my usual routine of getting up in time to make my face less and less important. Like many of us, I wasn't prioritizing my beauty routine, but rather focusing even more on skin care and experimenting with the occasional fun makeup look.

The whirlwind experience of the Missouri Method was challenging yet gratifying, but what I lost in those hectic days of lugging camera equipment with me across the state was essential breathing room to see the woman I had become in the three years since I began college.

I realized on that June afternoon that I hadn't fully seen myself as unvarnished and unfiltered as I had during quarantine since before I started wearing makeup. With my long days at the journalism school behind me, I was finally seeing my makeup free face more often — and out of this new normal, I gained acceptance. For me, the pandemic was a tipping point in my relationship with beauty where I became comfortable not wearing makeup in public, and I even began preferring my face foundation-free. And on the cusp of graduation, this change couldn't have come at a better time.

As it turns out, I was not alone. The pandemic, for all of its consequences, has also served as a universal pause button — a moment of freedom — for other college seniors to reflect before joining the "real" world. But this isn't the first time young adults have universally taken to changing their appearance.

The famous bob hairstyle, boyish silhouette and short skirts of the flapper girls in the roaring 20s were much more than fashion statements. Look past the Gatsby facade of the era and you'll find these women were part of [a new strain of independent women](#) seeking political, economic and sexual freedoms, according to an article from Smithsonian Magazine. They ditched the corsets and Victorian values of their parents, preferring to dance in jazz clubs, drive cars and attend college. Their bobbed up hair, flattened chests and straight silhouettes aimed to emulate the boys they envied, who had political freedom and a lack of domestic responsibilities. While flapper girls had different reasons for their makeover, soon-to-be-college-grads might

relate to this previous generation in their similar affinity for breaking convention, or in simply looking in the mirror at their fresh tattoo or newly pierced nose.

After meeting with a close friend who emerged from quarantine with bangs she cut herself, I quickly realized my peers were also changing their habits to match these unprecedented times. There are others like MU student Rhaea Lehman, who is discovering that she loves her red-turned-pink hair, and Jack Hale, who has found solace in adding tattoos to their dinosaur-themed sleeve.

Lehman has taken advantage of the “creativity kick” the pandemic offered her, and began experimenting with a Wet n Wild 40 color eyeshadow palette and even dyed her hair red for Halloween. She says painting and creating makeup looks during quarantine served as safe hobbies she could do at home without risking her family’s health.

MU senior Jack Hale added two tattoos to their collection of dinosaur tattoos. In early March shortly before governor Mike Parson initiated the stay-at-home orders, they got two pachycephalosaurus tattoos on their right arm that headbutt when they bend their arm.

Hale has been getting these tattoos since their 18th birthday to mark their progression through life, and adding to the collection before the state closed down only felt right. “I just wanted to do something for myself that I would enjoy to distract from everything that was going on at the time,” Hale says.

In October, they were inspired to get a tattoo of a star-shaped birthmark on their left shoulder similar to one an anime character has. Beyond tattoos, they have also changed their facial hair, choosing to shave their face in April, then let it grow out before trimming it down every few weeks.

There is something intrinsically personal about appearance that goes far more than skin deep; rather, it captures our identity, personality and signifies part of who we are. This is a foundational element of Kaylee Concannon’s business, Uplifted Salon, where she aims to empower and inspire the women who visit. There, she and her team make transformations happen daily — their signature being blinding and balayage.

“I feel like 90% of the time whenever somebody sits down, they want to make some kind of change, whether it’s like a big haircut or highlights,” Concannon says. “As of lately, it’s more of a big appearance change.”

As I pulled up to the sleek building on Columbia’s southeast side, I almost wasn’t sure I was in the right place until I spotted the namesake cursive lettering and textured stone wall that backdrops many of the salon’s Instagram photos. Once inside, the interior is as picturesque as a street name like Falling Leaf Court suggests — and Concannon’s vision is all over it. The open concept space invites you in with its bright white walls, clean lines and pane of curtainless windows that filter in the mid-morning light. But it’s the homey details of the snack bar stocked with healthy treats, the letterbox sign spelling out “We missed you” and the homemade statement wall at the back of the salon that give the place personality.

But don’t mistake her job as just doing hair. For Concannon, beauty goes beyond aesthetics and vanity — she believes it can help women feel more confident and in control while also being a way for them to have fun experimenting with their look. Her salon is a space where

guests can expect to feel pampered and heard while also squeezing in a healthy dose of hair care tips, laughs and unfiltered talk about life. This might be why the salon has amassed a cult following of customers, and why the business continued receiving appointment requests even during their month long shutdown in March.

“Whenever we came back there was an overwhelming demand. So we were really thankful for that,” Concannon says. “The 2008 recession is when balayage became a trending hairstyle ... because it's something that's really lived in looking already so you can go six months to a year before you have to really get it redone. That trend is really strong and true because people just don't want to have that maintenance.”

Dr. Peter Helm, a Postdoctoral Fellow at MU, doesn't find it surprising that many people are continuing to value their beauty routines despite how disruptive the pandemic has been on everyday life. “Not only does it bring a sense of normalcy but it likely helps people feel motivated to tackle the inevitable challenges that still await us in this pandemic,” he says.

For college seniors in particular, Helm says there is heightened stress that comes with uncertainty around their futures, and the pandemic has only contributed to those fears. [Research from 2013](#) even suggests that the more stressful life events people experience (such as a global pandemic and other life events), the more likely they are to change their appearance.

“There are so many uncontrollable and unpredictable elements in life right now,” Helm says. “However, one's appearance is something that can be controlled. So changing one's look is a way to gain some sense of control in an otherwise uncontrollable situation.”

For senior Tiffany Jordan, cutting her hair in April was the change she needed after being inside for two months during stay-at-home orders. “It definitely made me feel free and gave me the sense that life goes on even though it felt like the world had stopped,” Jordan says.

Seniors like Jessica Tompkins and Erin Davis opted for more permanent changes. Tompkins got a double helix piercing on her left ear in August at Iron Tiger as a way to bond with her two new roommates when they realized they all wanted piercings. She says the change gave her “something new to embrace” in the often monotonous life during the pandemic.

In Davis' case, she decided to get a tattoo of cartoon character Morty from the animated TV show “Rick and Morty”. While she says she would have gotten the tattoo regardless of the pandemic, she says “looking at my tattoo everyday just makes me smile and laugh, which I think everyone needs in their life.”

If experimenting with our looks is a source of happiness, then it's no wonder the beauty industry has created a multibillion dollar business out of selling bite size promises of dopamine. Larissa Jensen is very familiar with the industry and its appeal to consumers. As an Industry Advisor and the Vice President for U.S. Beauty at The NPD Group, she tracks and anticipates industry trends. In her article [“The Beauty of Staying Home”](#), she says the industry began taking a hit in March, experiencing a 58% decline in total sales in the week ending March 28 compared to the prior year. But unsurprisingly, online sales also increased during that same week with NPD reporting a 47% online sale growth, proving the lure of the beauty market might be as strong as ever.

“Beauty provides confidence, hope, a temporary escape, and — contrary to today's more formal definition — beauty is essential,” Jensen says in her article, “The Beauty of Staying Home”. “If you doubt that, think about this: what is the first thing most people will do when they

emerge from quarantine? I'd be willing to bet that hair salons, nail salons, and barbershops will be overrun."

The numbers on makeup use during the pandemic is a keen tribute to the emotional power the beauty industry holds. In NPD's May [Makeup Consumer Report](#), just over 7-in-10 women have reported wearing makeup less often this year, yet over 80% of women say they will return to their regular makeup usage once a sense of normalcy comes back.

The beauty routine has a transformative, almost therapeutic quality to it where one might attempt to whisk away the world's problems, even for a moment, with each swipe of a makeup brush or flourish of a curling iron. Its absence also speaks volumes; now that I've come to embrace this version of myself sans makeup, I've found a certain level of honesty ricocheting into other areas of my life. Where I would usually refrain from validating my own fears, particularly around the pandemic, I have shifted to being more forgiving of my own perceived shortcomings during this time.

The last few months have not only allowed me to see myself as I am, but it has also helped me accept the person I have become, flaws and all. I now wear makeup because I want to, and I still get excited to play with different colors and textures in my makeup collection. I hope to come out of the pandemic with these changes intact, and when I start my morning, to continue finding confidence with or without my favorite products.

Concannon probably said it best when she stated, "I think [with COVID-19] we've all been just hanging on. So a fun way to express yourself is through your hair and your makeup and things like that. It's fun to try different things, whether it's on the more extreme side or the more natural side. I just think people are ready to change."