

Religious Young People in Croatia on Beauty, Aesthetic Surgery and Ageing: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract

Background: In contemporary society, media and social networks promote youth and physical beauty as ideals, while ageing is often stigmatised. The growing use of aesthetic procedures like Botox and fillers reflects the influence of the beauty industry. In contrast, Christian anthropology views the body as a temple of the Holy Spirit and ageing as a path to wisdom, raising questions about how religious youth navigate these opposing values.

Aim: To explore how religious young people in Croatia interpret contemporary beauty norms, aesthetic surgery, and ageing.

Methods: A qualitative design based on semi-structured individual interviews was employed, following COREQ guidelines. Using snowball sampling, seven participants (aged 18–30, self-identified as religious and active in church communities) were recruited. Interviews took place in April–May 2024 at the parish of St. Anthony of Padua in Zagreb. Ethical approval was granted by the Catholic University of Croatia; all participants provided informed consent. Data were analysed using thematic analysis, progressing through open, axial, and selective coding.

Results: Participants identified media and social networks as key promoters of unrealistic beauty ideals. In response, they emphasised natural embodiment, spiritual balance, and healthy living. Attitudes toward aesthetic surgery were ambivalent—though not viewed as religiously forbidden, most supported bodily integrity and accepted interventions only for health or functional reasons. Ageing was seen positively, associated with maturity, wisdom, and respect for older adults.

Conclusion: Religious beliefs shaped how young participants interpreted cultural norms of beauty and ageing, promoting natural embodiment and viewing ageing as a stage of personal and spiritual growth. Findings highlight the role of religiosity in youth culture and call for further interdisciplinary research on embodiment, beauty, and ageing within contemporary society.

Keywords: aesthetic surgery, ageing, beauty, Croatia, religiosity, young people

Introduction

In contemporary society, the human body has become a central medium for expressing identity, lifestyle, and broader social trends. From the perspective of the sociology of the body, its role extends far beyond biological function, as the body is understood as a social and symbolic construct shaped by sociocultural norms, discourses, and practices (1). Within this framework, beauty, youth, and physical attractiveness are promoted as dominant and desirable norms, so-called ideal types, while ageing and older bodies are increasingly marginalised and symbolically devalued (2). In Western societies in particular, the youthful and slim body is reinforced as a symbol of sexual confidence, power, and self-control (3) with gendered differences in beauty ideals: men are expected to embody a muscular physique and defined facial features, while women are associated with facial symmetry and a toned figure (4). This cultural emphasis on youthful appearance and the social anxiety surrounding signs of ageing have reflected the rise in aesthetic surgery. As Elliott (5) observes, aesthetic procedures are marketed as tools for reclaiming youth, reflecting the economic capitalisation of the cult of youth by the beauty and makeover industries. Supporting this, data show that in 2023 alone, 15.8 million invasive or surgical and 19.1 million non-invasive procedures were performed worldwide, with botulinum toxin (further Botox) (8.8 million) and hyaluronic fillers (5.5 million) being the most common (6). Notably, more than 2.13 million Botox treatments were performed among individuals aged 18–34, including 62,000 minors, indicating a normalisation of anti-ageing culture worldwide. Media and social networks amplify body dissatisfaction and internalisation of idealised beauty norms (7), glorify celebrities (8), and promote reality makeover shows that foster acceptance of aesthetic surgery and the body as a visual project (9). Increasing attention is given to the role of platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat in shaping body image: “Social media is known to be highly appearance-focused, with content and messaging promoting idealised, unrealistic,

and unachievable beauty ideals and standards” (10). In contrast to these trends, religious beliefs within Christianity promote the body as a temple of the Holy Spirit and an image of God, thereby encouraging care and respect for its natural appearance and rhythm (11). The mechanisms through which religion influences body perception are multidimensional as they include moral norms, common practices, and symbolic discourses that redefine aesthetic ideals. Simultaneously, religion can enhance body perception and strengthen confidence by fostering faith in God’s unconditional love, dedication to a purposeful cause, and a sense of transcendence (such as peace and inspiration) through connection with God, religious practices, community acceptance, and social support in self-regulation (3).

These perspectives are outlined in this study using qualitative methodology, with the aim of exploring how religious youth in Croatia perceive beauty, ageing, and aesthetic surgery, focusing on non-invasive procedures such as Botox and fillers. The central premise is that religious beliefs may serve as a protective factor against socio-cultural and media-driven pressures to idealise physical appearance, pressures particularly pervasive in youth culture and the broader anti-ageing discourse. The research offers insight into the dynamics, trends, and values shaping youth perceptions of the body, while also emphasising the often-overlooked role of religiosity as a framework through which contemporary bodily practices are interpreted and negotiated. In doing so, the study contributes to the underexplored relationship between the body and society among religious youth within the Croatian socio-cultural context, adopting a multidisciplinary research perspective that bridges social sciences, humanities, biomedical, and health studies.

Methods

Study design

A qualitative study was conducted using semi-structured individual interviews. The interview protocol was developed in line with the COREQ guidelines.

Ethics

The protocol was approved by the Ethics Committee of the Catholic University of Croatia (Class No 60204/2411/004; Reg. No 498-15-06-24-004, 25 January 2024). All participants provided written informed consent and were briefed on the study's aims, procedures, data handling, and their rights. Participation was voluntary, anonymity was ensured via pseudonyms, recordings were password-protected and destroyed after transcription.

Participants and data collection

Given the qualitative nature of the research, the aim was not representativeness but a deeper insight into the experiences of religious young people. The study relied on a purposive sample of seven self-identified religious participants (18–30 years) from Croatia, recruited via snowball sampling through parish contacts, with the number set once data saturation was reached. Interviews were held in April–May 2024 in the parish of St. Anthony of Padua, Zagreb, lasting approximately 30 minutes each. Audio was recorded on an iPhone 13 Pro and securely stored.

Data analysis

Audio recordings were fully transcribed and analysed using thematic analysis, following the stages of open, axial, and selective coding (12). Transcripts were systematically reviewed to identify patterns, categories, and themes that reflect the research aim of how religious young people in Croatia interpret contemporary beauty norms, aesthetic surgery, and ageing. We generated 30 initial codes, clustered into 5 subthemes and 3 overarching themes. Media influence encompassed social media, influencers and celebrities within broader beauty norms, while references to inner beauty and natural appearance reflected resistance to media-driven standards. The theme of aesthetic surgery revealed ambivalence, balancing the body as a divine gift with acceptance of ethically regulated interventions and the ageing theme emphasised valuing inner qualities and spiritual depth over physical changes.

Results

The study included seven religious young people from Croatia, based on results gathered through individual interviews and three main thematic categories: beauty, aesthetic surgery and ageing.

1. Beauty

Within the broad academic and public discourse on the existence of socially constructed beauty standards that directly and indirectly shape global aesthetic trends and individual aspirations, the initial question was posed to examine whether participants perceive such ideals to exist in society and in the media. All participants responded affirmatively, citing specific characteristics commonly associated with these standards, such as a slim and toned body, symmetrical facial features, white teeth, and a fashionable appearance, applicable to both genders. Most participants adopted a critical stance toward contemporary youth trends, emphasising the significant role of celebrities and the media, particularly social media platforms like TikTok and Instagram, in promoting unrealistic beauty norms. According to them, these standards contribute to a homogenised appearance among young people, with influencers and celebrities often openly advertising aesthetic procedures and thereby reinforcing a singular and difficult-to-attain image of ideal beauty.

“What I observe in today’s society is that young people, especially teenagers, are starting to look increasingly alike. This is largely due to aesthetic procedures that many young girls, even those my age, undergo in pursuit of a particular physical ideal of beauty. I believe this is all heavily influenced by social media. Many of them strive for that ideal to be accepted socially, to feel a sense of belonging. Personally, I don’t subscribe to that. For me, the physical ideal of beauty simply doesn’t exist” (Participant 2).

“Beauty ideals definitely exist. Some would argue they are even more prominent for women. However, lately, there has been a trend showcasing imperfections in women’s bodies. (...) Still, most of the people presented in the media and on Instagram are usually at the gym, muscular.

That's the dominant type among influencers. So, when it comes to what these ideals look like, for men it's typically being muscular, tall, and dark-haired, while for women, beauty is focused on facial attractiveness and having a fit body" (Participant 4).

"On a surface level, we are bombarded daily with images of celebrities and influencers we follow, whether we want to or not, and we tend to aspire to look more like them. But as a believer, I'd say that the longer you're rooted in faith, and the deeper your relationship with God and the Virgin Mary who serves as a role model for us women, the more you begin to understand that true beauty, both internal and external, lies in being who you genuinely are, in having that inner beauty" (Participant 5).

While acknowledging media-driven pressures, participants showed a clear awareness of a dominant beauty ideal promoted through celebrities and social media that shapes social expectations and self-image. They recognised these standards as a source of pressure, particularly for young people. Framing their critique through a religious lens, many argued that such ideals distort the "hidden divine beauty" within each person. Religious belief thus emerges not only as moral guidance but as a critical lens through which young believers evaluate and resist societal norms. For them, faith redefines beauty, not as external perfection, but as the wholeness of identity and dignity, as further reflected in their reflections on the concept of beauty in the following section.

1.1. Personal Conceptions of Beauty

The following question in this section addressed participants' personal understanding of beauty. Although the question did not explicitly ask whether their individual views diverged from societal or media-driven conceptions, several participants spontaneously positioned their responses in contrast to mainstream beauty ideals. As expressed by research participants:

"My vision of physical beauty partly overlaps with, but also diverges from, what is being imposed on us (...). Not everyone has to be blonde, tall, and skinny. Everyone is beautiful in

their own way. What matters to me is the inner beauty that radiates kindness from within. You know what they say: sometimes someone seems beautiful until they speak" (Participant 1).

"My idea of physical beauty is someone with a natural appearance without silicone, fillers, or Botox because we weren't created to be unnatural. All of that was invented by humans, and I personally don't like it" (Participant 7).

"To me, physical beauty means that a young person, or even someone middle-aged or older, regardless of age, takes care of their body. That their body is well-groomed, clean, and not neglected. It's about maintaining one's appearance on a natural basis" (Participant 6).

"I think every girl should be natural, the way God created her, not disfigured or covered up in a way that hides what she really looks like. If you wear so much makeup that your real face can't be seen, it's too much. I believe the more natural someone is, the better" (Participant 3).

Based on participants' statements, it can be concluded that personal conceptions of beauty largely revolve around the ideal of naturalness, often equated with unaltered authenticity and positioned in opposition to aesthetic interventions. In this context, naturalness does not imply neglect of physical appearance, but rather its cultivation through a healthy lifestyle, proper hygiene, and moderation. Several participants also articulated a spiritual dimension of beauty, wherein physical appearance is viewed as secondary to inner goodness and moral integrity, and beauty itself is interpreted as a divine gift that should be accepted and preserved in its original form.

2. Aesthetic surgery

The growing popularity of aesthetic surgery raises important questions about how religious youth relate to such practices: whether they reject them entirely or hold more liberal views. To explore this, participants were asked about their general attitudes toward aesthetic procedures and whether they would personally consider undergoing them, either in the near or distant future. Their responses revealed a careful negotiation between the belief that the body is a divine gift not to

be altered lightly and the view that modern medical and technological advances may offer acceptable means of enhancing or preserving one's appearance, particularly given that they do not see aesthetic procedures as inherently opposed to religious teachings.

"I don't think religion poses a barrier if it doesn't completely distort a person's appearance. If it stays within normal limits, I think it's fine. If it brings satisfaction and helps them feel better in their own skin, that's understandable. Unfortunately, many people go too far and end up altering their face and identity beyond recognition" (Participant 1).

"Faith shouldn't necessarily be a barrier. What matters is that the person is doing it for the right reasons, for their own well-being and health, not due to societal pressure. So, every such decision should be carefully thought through and aligned with the values we seek to live by" (Participant 6).

When it comes to personal engagement with such procedures, participants expressed mixed feelings. While some maintained a strong preference for natural approaches, others remained open to the possibility of aesthetic interventions under specific circumstances, such as ageing or medical necessity.

"In the near future, within five years, I wouldn't consider either invasive or non-invasive procedures, and I don't think I'd ever undergo an invasive one... Right now, I'm still young, I don't have any wrinkles or signs of ageing. But when I get older, maybe I'll feel different. Maybe I won't be happy with what I see in the mirror. I might try Botox, maybe want slightly fuller lips because, like I said, the media really pushes a certain image of beauty" (Participant 1.)

"When I was younger, I used to think about getting a nose job. But now I try to take care of myself naturally... Still, I can't say I'll never consider something like Botox in the future" (Participant 5).

In conclusion, participants articulated a thoughtful and ethically grounded approach to aesthetic surgery. While clearly advocating for naturalness, bodily authenticity, and respect for the body as created in the image of God, they did not fully reject the use of aesthetic procedures.

3. Ageing

Participants' relationship with the topic of ageing is explored through two thematic subsections. The first focuses on their reflections regarding their own ageing, and the second addresses their views on the attractiveness and beauty of older individuals.

This question explored whether participants think about their own ageing, how they imagine themselves as older individuals, and the feelings or images this evokes. Nearly all responded that they do not actively contemplate ageing, as it still feels distant due to their youth. However, ageing was not viewed negatively or with resistance. Instead, most associate it with personal and spiritual growth, the acquisition of wisdom, family life, and intergenerational connections. At the same time, all expressed concern about the physical limitations and illnesses that may accompany old age but also stated their belief that faith will provide strength and support in facing these challenges.

"Honestly, at this moment, I haven't really thought about ageing. I try to live in the present, in the here and now, and experience it the best I can. But if I had to imagine myself as an older person, the images and feelings that come up are positive (...) I could even say I'm looking forward to being older, to being wiser, maybe even a bit smarter" (Participant 2).

"Well, I don't really think about ageing that much, but I can imagine myself as an older person. I picture myself as a grandpa fishing, with lots of grandkids running around me. If I manage to build the kind of family I want, the feelings and images that arise are really beautiful" (Participant 6).

"Right now, I don't think much about ageing since I'm 25, and I don't think I'll seriously consider it until I'm maybe 40 or 50. But I do see myself becoming like my grandfather, a good, natural, normal kind of person" (Participant 7).

"The more time I spend on social media, the more I see those so-called anti-ageing skincare ads. But honestly, I'm not afraid of ageing. My mindset is not about looking younger but about looking the best, I can in the moment I'm in" (Participant 5).

3.1. Beauty and Attractiveness in Older Age

The second question in the section on ageing addressed the idea of beauty in older age. Participants discussed whether older individuals can be attractive and beautiful, and whether that is something they themselves would strive for as they grow older. There was a shared consensus that old age carries its own kind of beauty, especially when accompanied by physical activity, self-care, and spiritual depth.

"When you see certain grandmas and grandpas, you can tell how kind they are, how much goodness radiates from them. And that makes them attractive in their own way. Not physically, because in old age, everyone kind of looks the same, with wrinkles, grey hair, a slower walk, hunched over. But still, you can really see when someone is happy and fulfilled" (Participant 1).

"I do believe older people can be attractive and beautiful. Of course, everyone is beautiful in their own way. For me, there are no 'ugly' people. If someone takes care of their body regularly, both physically and spiritually, then yes, they can be very attractive. Honestly though, for me, that's not really the goal in older age. What matters more is being a good person, a kind human being" (Participant 6).

"Because of new trends, there are more older people who look beautiful and attractive. They're constantly working out and staying physically active. That's definitely one of my goals for old age: to stay active, so I can age well" (Participant 4).

In conclusion, all participants agreed that older age brings its own distinct form of beauty, one grounded less in physical appearance and more in spiritual depth, marked by inner peace, life wisdom, and values rooted in faith.

The main themes identified in the study are summarised in Figure 1.

Discussion

The findings highlight the tension between mainstream beauty norms propagated through social media and individual conceptions of authenticity and naturalness. This tension reflects broader sociocultural dynamics of individualism and consumerism, where individuals are expected to shape their identities through physical appearance, while also embracing alternative forms of self-acceptance grounded in authentic personal values. By exploring attitudes toward aesthetic procedures and ageing, the research sheds light on how these young participants navigate cultural expectations and spiritual beliefs following their critical engagement with dominant beauty discourses.

Participants recognised the influence of socially constructed beauty ideals, especially those influenced by media and celebrity culture on platforms like Instagram and TikTok, which were viewed to promote gender specific ideals, aligning with Etcoff's (4) valorisation of masculinity in men and slim, symmetrical features in women. They acknowledged the presence of homogenisation of youth appearance, echoing Jung et al. (10), who link frequent social media use with a stronger internalisation of the idealised body. Rather than passively accepting these pressures, participants demonstrated a critical and active engagement with them and contrasted them with personal values such as authenticity, health and inner beauty, favouring naturalness over artificial enhancement. They contrasted the visual standardisation of youth and unrealistic expectations with the idea of beauty as an expression of individual identity and dignity. Religious belief appeared to provide an alternative framework to mainstream

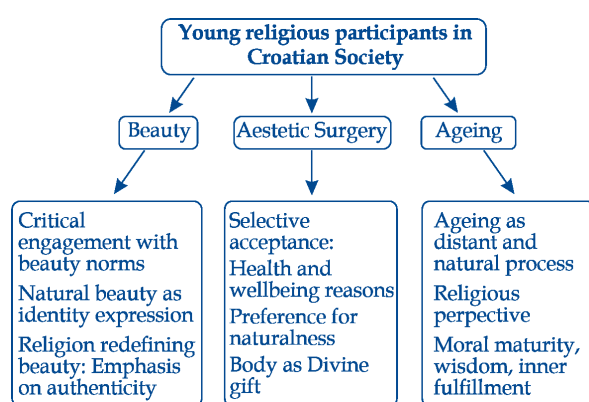


Figure 1. Conceptual framework of themes: beauty, aesthetic surgery, and ageing among young religious participants in Croatian society.

beauty ideals, as Homan and Boyatzis (13) observed, spiritual connectedness may reduce susceptibility to beauty pressures. This view is further reinforced by Mahoney et al. (14) as well as Holman (15), who report more positive body image among religious individuals, suggesting that faith can serve as a counterbalance to dominant aesthetic narratives.

Participants expressed selective attitudes toward aesthetic surgery. For some, such procedures were framed through a religious lens as violations of divine design, echoing Homan's and Boyatzis's (13) findings on faith-based interpretations of bodily integrity. Others, however, viewed minor aesthetic enhancements as compatible with personal well-being, indicating a more individualised ethics of care. This ambivalence parallels recent findings among Croatian youth, where approximately one-third of students reported openness to aesthetic procedures, often considering a range of invasive and non-invasive options (16). Such perspectives point to a broader cultural reconfiguration in which bodily modification is increasingly integrated into everyday self-care and identity practices, blurring the line between enhancement and normalisation.

Participants rarely reflected on their own ageing, which they perceived as temporally distant due to their youth. This distancing mirrors findings by Rupperecht et al. (17), who note that young people often sustain a selectively youthful self-image in response to societal ageism and the cultural valorisation of youth. Despite this, ageing was not framed negatively; participants associated it with moral maturity, strengthened family ties, and spiritual depth, even citing a family role model as an example. While participants were aware of physical decline and illness, faith was described as a key source of strength and support, redefining beauty in ageing throughout inner qualities and self-care. Such views resonate with Malone et al. (18), who highlight how spirituality offers meaning and resilience in ageing, while Mahoney et al. (14) emphasise its role in shifting focus from external appearance to enduring values like compassion and inner fulfilment.

Conclusion

This paper presents findings from a qualitative study on how young religious individuals in Croatia perceive beauty, aesthetic surgery, and ageing. The research offers an interdisciplinary perspective by integrating insights from sociology, religious studies, health, and biomedical sciences. While the use of a convenience sample limits the generalizability of findings, the study addresses globally relevant issues within a national context, grounded in the everyday experiences of young people.

Participants demonstrated a critical awareness of socially constructed beauty norms, particularly those influenced by social media and celebrity culture. These norms were interpreted through a religious lens that challenges dominant ideals by emphasising authenticity, inner beauty, and holistic well-being over appearance and conformity. In this way, religion emerges as a key influence in redefining beauty. Although ageing was not a personally pressing issue for participants, it was generally viewed as a natural and meaningful life process, associated with wisdom, spiritual maturity, and personal growth. Attitudes toward aesthetic surgery were ambivalent: while not perceived as religiously prohibited, surgical interventions were approached with caution, and a preference was expressed for maintaining the natural body.

Based on the research insights, we conclude that religiosity functions not only as a source of resistance to aesthetic pressures, but also as a normative and meaning-making framework through which young people in Croatia critically interpret and navigate contemporary social trends shaped by the cult of eternal youth and the normative demands of the beauty industry. At the same time, this very framework highlights the need for future comparative research including young people who are not religious, in order to examine potential differences in perceptions of beauty, aesthetic procedures and ageing, thereby providing a more comprehensive understanding of how diverse value systems shape youth responses to the pressures of the beauty industry.

Declarations

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Authors' contributions: IBL contributed to the concept and research design; GK was responsible for data collection; IBL, GK, and PM conducted the analysis and interpretation of data, IBL and PM did drafting and writing of the manuscript. All authors approved the final version of the manuscript.

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