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Appetite for self-construction: Social media sets off a cosmetic surgery frenzy

In the era of the selfie, imperfection is perceived as no longer acceptable and Instagram is setting the new beauty ideals

Jackie K., a former model who is studying to be a nurse, had always dreamed of having bigger breasts, but it was Instagram that cemented her decision. "I follow Candace Swanepoel, the Victoria's Secret Angel, and I wanted my breasts to be the same size as hers," says the 27-year-old. "I'd stalk her on Instagram while sitting on the couch with my boyfriend, and I became more fixated on getting my breasts done. He thought I looked fine, but I drove him nuts until he finally offered to give me the surgery as a gift." Jackie brought her phone to Dr. Alan Matarasso's office to show the Park Avenue plastic surgeon a feed of Swanepoel spilling out of her lingerie. "He made my breasts the same size as hers and very natural," she happily reports.

Jackie is among a growing number of women whose cosmetic choices have been spawned by social media. Influenced by Instagram photos of those they admire, and looking to perfect endless selfies of themselves, they are using the Internet as a vast marketplace. Many are now documenting and posting their own procedures, and esthetic advice coming from friends on Facebook has become more powerful than advertising. Even basic make-up guidance is going viral when delivered by beauty bloggers like Huda Kattan, who has 6 million followers.

"Social media is having a massive impact!" says Dr. Matarasso. "It has opened up plastic surgery to a whole new segment of potential patients. People are walking around with cameras 24/7. They get a lip injection, and one minute later they are on Instagram showing off their new look."

In previous decades, those who opted for plastic surgery slipped away for a few days and emerged looking miraculously rejuvenated. "The older generations were discreet about getting plastic surgery, but the young people want to show off the work," maintains Dr. Judith Hellman, a plastic surgeon. "They want the 'rich face' that means you can afford work." In fact, beauty seekers are eager to share their information with the public, happily documenting their journeys on the Internet. "Patients will start sending out feeds from the minute they wake up from surgery: it's a very popular practice among teens," says Dr. Matarasso.

There is also a sense that it's almost a civic duty to share one's surgical experiences on the Internet. When 21-year old college student Kristen Kosciuszko decided to get her nose and ears cosmetically refined, she didn't tell her siblings or friends. "My brothers are clueless; they thought I changed my hairstyle," she laughs. Despite her attempt at privacy, she had no problem posting her before and after photos virtually on RealSelf, a site where people share and rate their surgical experiences. "I don't choose a restaurant without checking people's opinions on the Internet, and I wanted to be helpful to other people interested in doing this," she explains.

Danielle Colgan, who posted photos of her eyelid tuck on RealSelf, says sharing her life has become de rigueur. "This is the world we live in; everything is an experience to be documented. I post gym photos, food photos and selfies. Why shouldn't I show off my new eyes? I am very proud of the way I look now and I posted the pictures because I thought people would be happy to see how little scarring or bruising there is. I didn't put these pictures on Facebook, but I'm not concerned at all about who might see them."

Madison Phillips, the 24-year old public relations specialist for RealSelf, says the site has become an online community. "The fact that thousands of people are posting naked photos of themselves pre- and post-surgery and getting support from strangers around the world is mind blowing," she says.

Selfies are another force driving patients to seek esthetic surgery. "I'm surprised at how frequently people will show me selfies, as well as pictures on Instagram and Facebook," notes Dr. David Hidalgo, a Manhattan plastic surgeon. "Often they are rhinoplasty patients; noses always look worse in these pictures. iPhone cameras somehow magnify the problem and people can catch themselves at a wrong angle and demand immediate relief."

Dr. Hellman says that people are trying to live up to their online personas. "Everyone is starring in their own reality show these days," she points out. "They create an image of perfection online and they come in because they want to match what they are putting forth. I have patients who want to have 'hand lifts' because they want to show off their engagement rings on Instagram, so they get fillers and remove brown spots. Now they have the perfect hands with the perfect rings at the perfect moments. Instagram is no longer insta."

Editing photos has also led to an increased quest for perfection. "It's very rare that people don't edit their lighting and body shapes or remove blemishes," observes the cosmetic dermatologist Dr. Paul Jarrod Frank. "You can photo shop things out online; the merging of digital media and advances in quick fix cosmetic dermatology gives people the instinct that they can do the same thing in real life."

Of course cameras are omnipresent these days, and the pressure is also on if your photo on LinkedIn or a dating site looks better than you actually do. "People used to get their pictures taken a couple of times a year, but now it's constant," notes Dr. Smythe Rich, a South Carolina based plastic surgeon. "Employers or potential love interests want to know what you look like; first impressions are no longer about charming people with your personality. Then you have to follow up with an actual meeting."

Dr. Rich maintains that with everyone trying their hardest to look their best, looking at yourself in a group picture can be daunting. "It's harder just to appear average because everyone looks better, so there is a lot more pressure," he says. "The tools available now were not available to our mothers. Everyone can have good cheekbones now; if you aren't born with them, you can rent them."

And if you don't maintain your looks, it's not just self-criticism you have to face; others are happy to do the critiquing for you on social media. "People are blatant and direct about it," sighs cosmetic dentist Dr. Larry Rosenthal. "They will circle a picture around someone's nose and say 'needs work'. I am shocked they can be so brutal."

Group photos also drive people into the dentist's chair. "In photos, white teeth look whiter and dark teeth look darker," explains cosmetic dentist Marc Lowenberg. "If you look at a photo, and your teeth look darker than your friend's, you become very aware of the contrast."

Social media has become the most powerful marketing tool for those in the beauty business. "All the cosmetic trends like contouring, lip contouring and over-the-top lashes are being created on social media; it's rapid fire," says Jamie Ahn, founder of The Beauty Blazers, a site that sells cosmetic products and gives online do-it-yourself tutorials. "We show clients how to stay on top of the trends. It's about being your own make-up artist these days."

Karina Freedman, who has a high-end esthetic salon specializes in lash extensions, says social media is the key to her success. "If you go on Google looking for a salon, it can be confusing, but when you get something directly from a friend you trust it," she points out. "When one of my clients posts about her experience, suddenly the message is going straight to all her friends and they are the exact demographic I am looking for."



Celebrities like Kim Kardashian, fitness models, and beauty bloggers have taken to Instagram to share photos of their coveted curves. (Images sourced from Instagram)

Those in the beauty world, including esthetic doctors, are behind the curve and missing a huge opportunity if they are not involved in social media, according to cosmetic dentist Dr. Michael Apa. He assessed that 30 percent of his New York patients come through Instagram, while at his Dubai office it's as high as 80 percent. "Social media has totally changed how people get information, especially 20- to 40-year-olds, and you have to be engaged in this to capture that audience," he asserts. "If people are interested in cosmetic work, they will follow a plastic surgeon or cosmetic dentist. I post before and after pictures and patients post their own. If you can treat a Kardashian or Huda Kattan and they post, then suddenly you have 6 million people seeing it."

Cosmetic dermatologist Howard Sobel says that patients who post their own pre- and post-op photos are invaluable. "Their friends and family check in, track their progress day by day, and tell them how wonderful they look," he notes. "It's a great marketing tool for the doctor. Of course, you don't want to publicize that patient who doesn't actually look better."