

Fashion & Beauty

How Snapchat dysmorphia drives teens to plastic surgery to copy looks phone camera filters give them

- Young people look obsessively through heavily filtered photos of influencers on Instagram, Snapchat and Weibo, and of themselves, then ask surgeons to copy them
- More than half the plastic surgery clients in China are under 28; the average age at which western Europeans have cosmetic surgery has fallen by five years

Melissa Twigg



A decade ago, clients came into plastic surgery clinics carrying photographs of models, celebrities or even a particularly attractive family member. Today, they clutch heavily filtered images of themselves.

A new mental-health phenomenon known in the industry as Snapchat dysmorphia is raising its head, as selfie-led social media culture plays an increasingly pervasive role in shaping the relationship we have with our appearance.

“Social media is having a substantial effect on our culture as a whole,” says Julian De Silva, a plastic surgeon based in London’s Harley Street. “It’s heavily influencing plastic surgery trends and cosmetic treatments – and there has been a very rapid change over the last five years.

“Patients are taking more photos of themselves than ever, and as a result they are far more self-conscious about their appearance. Flaws they would previously have ignored have, since the advent of social media, plagued them.”

As a result, not only are the number of plastic surgery cases on the rise globally, the average age of clients has dropped, falling from 42 to 37 in western Europe.

Filters are also creating unrealistic expectations of what plastic surgery can achieve.

“Some patients will come with a photograph of an edited version of themselves and ask to look like that, but so much of what they want, such as moving the position of the eyes, is impossible anywhere but on an app,” says De Silva.

“This also feeds into the current subculture where people want extremes of appearance, so lips that look very voluptuous – but I always say no, because I don’t want them to look out of sync with normality.”

Social media’s role does not end there. Hugely successful apps bring together young women who are interested in surgery, creating a virtual community around physical insecurity.

So-Young – a marketplace in app form for cosmetic procedures in China – is the most famous globally, and generated US\$80 million in business last year. It offers information on 5,000 clinics and hospitals, and almost 10,000 doctors, and allows clients to pay through its app, and post their photos online afterwards.

“I’m wary about all this,” says De Silva, “There is no level of scrutiny or protection on what is put out there. Anyone can say anything and there still aren’t enough checks and balances in place.

“Fillers around the eyes, for example, don’t require a doctor or even nurse’s certificate, but going to an untrained health provider who makes a mistake can lead to lifelong complications with vision.”

“Our perception of beauty changes every decade,” says De Silva. “The feeling now is the most attractive quality is a blend of ethnicities. We did research on different aspects of the face and the ‘golden ratio’ of the modern era is very multicultural.”

