



‘Snapchat Dysmorphia’ Points To A Troubling New Trend In Plastic Surgery

Those pretty flower crown filters could have an ugly side.

By Julia Brucculieri
2.22.18

Snapchat and Instagram filters smooth out our skin, give us fuller lips and even make our eyes look bigger, all of which fall in line with Western society’s current beauty standards. As anyone who scrolls through their social media feed knows, filters — whether animal-faced, fairy-like or just altered in contrast — are the norm.

There has been much discussion about how these apps and filters may be bad for our self-esteem and whether they can lead to issues like body dysmorphic disorder, a body image disorder “characterized by persistent and intrusive preoccupations with an imagined or slight defect in one’s appearance,” according to the Anxiety and Depression Association of America.

Now, patients are even bringing filtered selfies to their plastic surgeons to illustrate what they’re looking to achieve, according to Dr. Matthew Schulman, a board-certified plastic surgeon based in New York City. One doctor has referred to this phenomenon as “Snapchat Dysmorphia.”

Some have even argued that Snapchat filters might be making us forget what we actually look like.

“There’s an issue with losing perspective on what you actually look like, and it’s not something we talk about much,” said Renee Engeln, professor of psychology at Northwestern University, and author of *Beauty Sick: How the Cultural Obsession with Appearance Hurts Girls and Women*. Before the days of Snapchat and Instagram, Engeln explained, altered photos were typically reserved for celebrities and models in ads or magazines, and we generally knew these images were edited.

But social media has changed that.

“It’s not enough [to] have to compare yourself to these perfected images of models, but now you’ve got this daily comparison of your real self to this intentional or unintentional fake self

that you present on social media. It's just one more way to feel like your falling short every day," Engeln said.

We've gotten to a point where people are using filters as a source of inspiration for potential cosmetic procedures that definitely don't come cheap. The majority of individuals who undergo cosmetic procedures are women, which makes sense considering the constant pressure they feel to live up to society's ever-changing and sometimes harmful beauty standards.

"It's a real bind we put women in when we give them this non-stop pressure to conform to this particular beauty ideal and then try to shame them when they feel that pressure and they do something about it," Engeln said. "I don't think that's the key here. I think what we want to be moving toward is more real representations of ourselves and I think that's becoming harder and harder."

The Intersection Of Social Media And Cosmetic Surgery

When many patients used to ask for Meghan Markle's nose or Kylie Jenner's lips, they're now showing their plastic surgeons filtered selfies.

"Everybody basically is using a filter on their own and they're either taking that next step to bring it to me saying, 'Hey, this is what I want to look like,' Schulman said. "Not everyone is going that far, but in their head, that's what they want to look like and then they're coming to me and saying I want smoother skin, I want my eyes to be opened up, I want my lips to be fuller. You kind of have those two groups of people."

Among the most popular filters are the ones that smooth the skin or blur out perceived imperfections.

"People are using that as an example of what they want their skin to look like, which basically means they want to get rid of irregular pigmentation and they want to soften fine lines and wrinkles," he said.

Patients are also taking inspiration from the filters that make the eyes look bigger — which Schulman said could require an eyelid surgery or botox injections — or their lips look fuller, which means "they're asking for fillers in their lips [like] Restylane or Juvederm."

[Dr. Michelle Yagoda](#), a facial plastic surgeon in New York City, agreed that more and more people seem to be turning to social media for beauty inspiration, though in her experience it hasn't been as obvious.

"I don't ever really have somebody that comes in and says I want to look like Angelina Jolie or I want to look like a Snapchat filter of myself. But I start to notice that they talk about things that are very similar to that without using those words," she said.

"Overall, people are concerned with their pore size and the texture and color of their skin — those are the things filters really address the most," she added. "Things like topical skincare

products that can contain glycolics and retinoids, chemical peels that can be given by professionals that are either mild or medium depth, laser resurfacing treatments, IPL treatments to get rid of brown spots, those kinds of things are the most common.”

As Engeln noted, trying to achieve smooth, youthful, blemish-free skin isn't a new concept, and these filters just reflect the standards we've already set in place.

“They're not changing the content of our beauty standards,” she said. “They're just making images of it more widely available.”

“We're at a new level when we actually lose touch with our own face or look surprised when we look in the mirror.” Renee Engeln, professor of psychology at Northwestern University.

For his part, Schulman said he preferred someone using a filtered image as a basis from which to get cosmetic surgery, rather than just asking to copy a celebrity. “Because at least you're starting with yourself at baseline.”

“I think it's a little bit more realistic than somebody coming in and bringing a picture of Angelina Jolie and saying, I want to look like her,” he said.

On the other hand, Yagoda said, there are other ways for patients to describe what they want.

“I don't think it's bad to use photos, as a patient, to convey your sense of aesthetic because there's no one beautiful for everyone,” she said.

One of the most important things to keep in mind when considering any cosmetic procedure is to think realistically. A procedure that yielded certain results in one person may not have the same results for you. Beyond that, as Schulman explained, cosmetic surgery isn't necessarily going to change your life.

“I turn down about 25 percent of people who come to see me for plastic surgery, and it's for a variety of reasons,” Schulman said. “Part of what I have to do is figure out if what they're requesting is doable and is it safe? Then, I also have to figure out, which is always harder, if they're doing it for the right reasons.”

Should We Be Concerned?

The trend of people requesting to look like filtered versions of themselves raises a number of questions about the ethics of cosmetic surgery, social media's influence on the practice and our society's beauty standards in general. For instance, is using a Snapchat- or Instagram-filtered version of yourself for inspiration realistic? Are filters promoting body dysmorphic disorder and/or making us obsessed with perfection?

For Schulman, no matter how you might feel about cosmetic surgery trends and social media's influence on them, it's not going to disappear. “The truth is, this is what it is.”

While he agreed that social media in general may be having a negative impact on our self image, Schulman added that, as a plastic surgeon, his goal is to give people what they want while still being realistic and not causing them any danger.

But Yagoda noted the potential individual and social effects of living life through Snapchat-filtered lenses.

“I think any time you’re able to shade out imperfections and make a better picture of yourself, it affects the way we see each other and the way we see ourselves,” she said, adding that if we’re constantly looking at filtered or edited photos of ourselves and others, that’s what we’ll always expect to see in real life.

“I think this is a real problem, but I doubt that it’s going to be significantly affecting more people than regular body dysmorphic disorder does,” she added. “It’s interesting, as the amount of magazines [that] are struggling and the amount of internet saturation rises, I think it’s just a different modality, but the same kind of exposure to unrealistic images that causes it.”

Engeln echoed Yagoda’s sentiment. “We’re at a new level when we actually lose touch with our own face or look surprised when we look in the mirror.”

For her, the problem is deeper than cosmetic surgery, as undergoing these types of procedures is often a choice that one should never feel ashamed of. However, Engeln noted, plastic surgery is “not a miracle.”

“There’s nothing that will permanently erase signs of aging or guarantee that you don’t get any blemishes or keep your eyes from getting wrinkled. We’re not there,” she said.

Instead, she explained, cosmetic surgery continues to feed into a “rat race culture where it feels like a constant beauty pageant.” If all your peers are having work done, you’re going to feel more pressure to do it yourself, she said.

“There is a real sense in which looking a certain way in this world gives you power and everybody knows that. Anyone who denies it is either lying or willfully blind to it,” Engeln added. “But what I worry about, especially as women age, is if they are putting all of their emotional stock in maintaining a certain type of appearance, that’s a really weak foundation to stand on as you age.”

She added, “You are never going to meet this culture’s beauty standard. If we all started meeting the standard, the standard would just be changed.”