

WOMEN

Selfies, Surgeries And Self-Loathing: Inside The Facetune Epidemic

The massively popular photo-editing app Facetune is driving a generation of young women to extreme and obsessive lengths to look flawless online.

By Jesselyn Cook

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Illustration by Yoshi Sodeoka for HuffPost

Sky Lane scrolled through the pictures from an impromptu photo shoot she'd done with her friend and picked her favorite. It was cute — she was showing off her side profile in a black crop top, tight blue jeans, big silver hoops and smoky bronze eyeshadow. But the 21-year-old wouldn't dare post it to Instagram for the world to see just yet. She opened Facetune, a photo-retouching app on her iPhone, and got to work.

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Using the “Reshape” tool, she started pushing her tummy inward, little by little. She had to be careful not to noticeably warp the background in the process; the trick was to edit the photo without making it *look* like it had been edited. Skewed lines, blurry edges and inconsistencies in shadows and reflections were easy giveaways that Lane had learned how to avoid through years of practice — she'd been Facetuning since she was a teenager. She used the same tool to give herself a breast lift, slim her arm, cinch her waist and make her butt rounder, like the bodies flooding her Instagram feed.

Next she moved onto her face. Her friend had taken the photo using a Snapchat filter that had already plumped her lips, slimmed her nose and smoothed her skin so much her pores were no longer visible, but Lane applied Facetune's complexion retouching effect for

too. Usually she'd written her teeth, but they were rarely showing.

The more technical tweaks, like individually repositioning her eyebrows and narrowing the tip of her nose, required tools only available on the paid version of the app, which she'd upgraded to long ago.

She was done in under 20 minutes. The final product still looked like her, Lane decided, just a better, more acceptable version. She sent it to her mom, who didn't seem to notice that anything had been altered, giving Lane the reassurance she needed that it was pretty *and* believable — polished but not overdone. She wouldn't want her followers to accuse her of being a “catfish,” a term that has evolved in the Facetune era to describe someone who enhances their pictures beyond recognition.

Lane was finally ready to post the photo. It got 179 “likes,” which she thought was pretty good; without Facetune, she figured, she’d be lucky to get 40. Like the myriad other women who’ve been conditioned to pick apart their appearances, Lane has countless insecurities — including many that are invisible to everyone except her. The app makes them go away with a few simple finger strokes and ushers in the social validation she craves, which is at once addictively thrilling and utterly depressing.

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Facetune makes it harder for her to love herself, but at least she can love her selfie.





Sky Lane uses Facetune to reshape her body and tweak her facial features in photos she posts to Instagram.

COURTESY OF SKY LANE

“It can get super obsessive, because the second I take a photo I feel like I need to Facetune it,” Lane said. “Now I’ll be like, ‘Oh my God, I’m chubby, but I can fix that.’”

about its toll on the self-esteem of women, and girls in particular, is nothing new. But with the meteoric rise of Facetune and a suite of similar apps that put ever-advancing versions of these tools into the pocket of anyone with a smartphone, digitally perfected faces and bodies are no longer restricted to magazine covers or pictures posted by celebrities who can afford cosmetic surgeries and professional photo editors. They're *everywhere* in our social media world: all over the profiles of influencers and, quite possibly, your own friends. As a result, the pressure facing today's young women to look flawless can feel inescapable.

We've been sinking deeper into this reality for a while now, but it has accelerated during the pandemic, when we've spent [more time than ever](#) on social media, and when our digital selves have for so long been the only version anyone has seen of us. The result is a body dysmorphia epidemic with increasingly unattainable beauty standards that — at the extremes — defy basic human physiology.

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“If I’m not coming to Kylie Jenner-level of perfection on a photo, literally what is the point of posting it?”

- Harmonie Christian, 22-year-old Facetune user

Cosmetic surgeons who spoke to HuffPost said they now regularly have patients come in with photos of themselves that have been so

replicate. Jaws so slim teeth would need to be pulled, facial structures so warped eyeballs would need to be repositioned, legs so long femurs would need to be stretched, heads so narrow skulls would need to be reshaped, waists so cinched ribs and internal organs would need to be removed.

“Apps like Facetune give individuals this totally false impression of what they can look like,” said Dr. Philip Miller, a surgeon at Gotham Plastic Surgery in Manhattan.

“I get patients who aren’t even requesting a procedure, they’re requesting a *result* — they’re saying, ‘Do whatever you need to do to make me look like this.’ And it’s like, ‘Great, let me crack open your head, take out your teeth and reposition your bones.’”

HuffPost spoke with young women across the country who downloaded Facetune hoping to vanquish their insecurities, only to find that using the app has left them feeling more insecure than ever. Several said they edit their selfies so much that they feel anxious about seeing their followers in-person, but still aren’t willing to stop Facetuning.

Since posting that photo of herself last February, Lane, who’s now 22 and works at Starbucks in Jacksonville, Florida, has gotten lip fillers and Botox. She wants a nose job to make her already-small nasal tip more refined, more Botox to remove the fine lines on her forehead and liposuction or cryolipolysis, a nonsurgical fat reduction treatment.

“If I could just look like my pictures,” Lane said, “I wouldn’t need to Facetune anymore.”

‘Who Doesn’t Use Facetune?’



Maxine, 25, a graduate student at Long Beach State University, would only ever edit away circumstantial imperfections in her photos. Using a basic retouching tool, she'd erase the occasional blemishes and flyaway hairs that, in her mind, detracted from otherwise great pictures. She never felt the need to change anything else.

Maxine learned about Facetune as a sophomore in college, when her sorority sister started posting photos of the two of them that looked "off." She could tell something was different about her own face in the images. When she confronted her sorority sister, she was upset to learn that she'd been Facetuning *both* of them — editing things about Maxine's appearance that she hadn't previously felt insecure about, like the height of her hairline and the shape of her nose.

But when Maxine went on to experiment with Facetune herself, she was pleasantly surprised by how easy it was to turn a great picture into an *amazing* one, and she discovered that everyone around her was already using the app. Her sorority sister, she realized, had been doing her a courtesy by enhancing her appearance.

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"It feels like Facetune etiquette," said Maxine, now a regular Facetune user who pays for the premium version, and who's identified by a pseudonym to keep that aspect of her online life private. "If you're going to edit yourself in a picture with someone else, you have to edit them, too."

menus have group chats where they send each other their

Facetuned photos for “approval” before posting them to social media, to ensure they don’t look overedited. For group photos that multiple people intend to post, everyone gets a chance to edit their own face and body (or request that someone else does so) before anyone shares the photo publicly, to guarantee consistency across all posts.

“At this point it’s almost like, who *doesn’t* use Facetune?”



Lauren Florio has been using Facetune since the app came out when she was in high school.

COURTESY OF LAUREN FLORIO



H.I.D. students and a former clerk for the Supreme Court of Israel

launched it through their company Lightricks in 2013, at a time when Instagram, not even three years old, had just been acquired by Facebook and was exploding in popularity. Months after Facetune's release, the word "selfie" was added to the Oxford Dictionary, foreshadowing the app's almost immediate success. Within a year, Facetune was the top-ranked photo and video app in the App Store across 120 countries, and by 2016, Lightricks had launched Facetune2, a more advanced version that was also an instant hit.

Lightricks did not respond to requests for comment for this story.

Today, Facetune is so widely used that it has become a stand-in word for "edit," much like "Photoshop." It has scored powerful endorsements from celebrities and influencers including [Khloe Kardashian](#), [Chrissy Teigen](#), [James Charles](#), [Busy Philipps](#), [Tana Mongeau](#) and others. YouTube and TikTok are littered with Facetune tutorials demonstrating how to do everything from painting on makeup to shading on abs.

The app, which has been downloaded more than 160 million times, according to its website, saw a [20% increase in usage](#) at the start of the pandemic, and has [1 million to 1.5 million retouched photos](#) exported every single day.

To Facetune virgins, these numbers may seem shocking, but if you're on Instagram, Facebook or other photo-sharing websites, the chances are high that you've scrolled past Facetuned images without realizing it. Part of the goal of using Facetune is often to hide the fact that you've done so — to make it seem as if your pictures are naturally flawless, à la "I woke up like this."

"I wish that I could go back and

Facetune, because it's so hard to stop.”

- Lauren Florio, 25-year-old Facetune user

But not everyone is totally oblivious to these efforts. Instagram has [a community](#) of Facetune watchdogs: Large accounts such as [@fakegirlsfvckya](#), [@s0cialmediavsreality](#), [@beauty.false](#), [@igfamousbydana](#) and [@celebface](#), which has 1.5 million followers, pull back the curtain on just how widespread this kind of editing is among celebrities and influencers specifically by comparing their Instagram photos to unaltered paparazzi pictures, or drawing viewers' attention to unnatural-looking details.

“Pretty much every single influencer uses Facetune, except for the handful of body-positive ones who go out of their way to talk about why it can be toxic,” said Dana Omari, 31, the [med-spa](#) and social media consultant from Houston behind [@igfamousbydana](#).

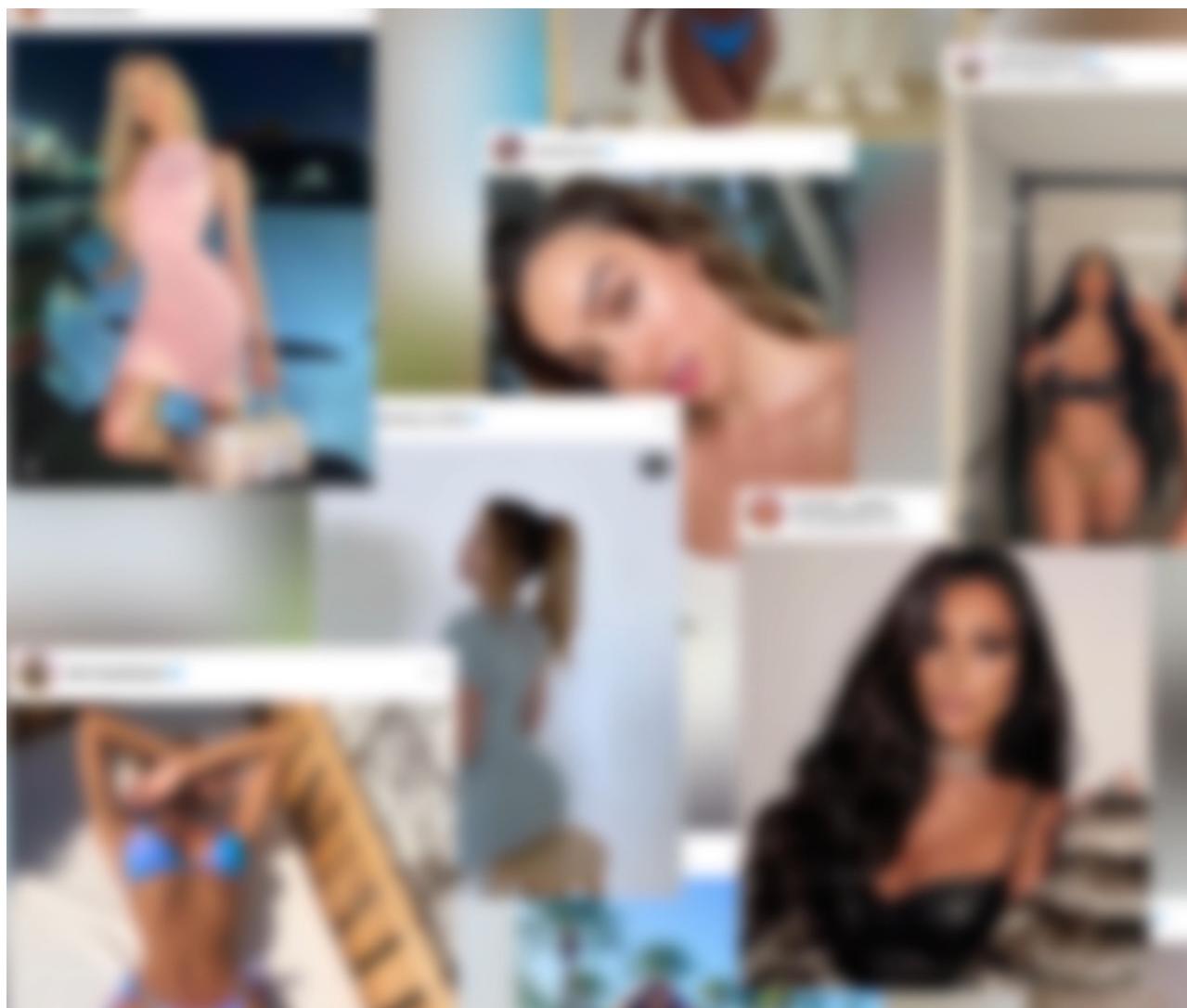
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“To the untrained eye, it can be hard to tell [when someone has used Facetune], but just little tweaks here and there can give them a totally different appearance,” she added. “Anyone can change their entire body or face in a couple minutes.”

The pressure to do so is, for many, part of the Instagram experience.

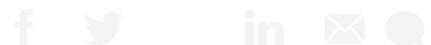
young users early in the pandemic, is a cultural ground zero for new and emerging beauty trends: hence the terms “Instagram model” and “Instagrammable,” meaning aesthetically pleasing enough to post. But it isn’t just hosting an endless sea of images showcasing unrealistic beauty standards — it’s actively driving users with body image issues toward them.

Instagram’s Explore feed is algorithmically curated to show users more of what they already look at, whether it’s puppies, vegan meal plans or picture-perfect influencers. The result is an echo chamber in which self-conscious young women are bombarded with photos of their desired faces and bodies every time they open the app.



Instagram

These are some of the images that Instagram has algorithmically promoted



multiple hours per day looking at photos of Instagram models, comparing herself to them and fixating on her own perceived flaws. But it's not just the rich and famous flaunting flawless figures and selfies in her feed anymore — it's her own friends now, too.

It has gotten to the point that Lane won't even take photos of herself without using the built-in filters on Instagram and Snapchat that enhance users' features in real-time: enlarging their eyes, smoothing and brightening their complexions, slimming and lifting their noses, sculpting their cheekbones and jawlines, pouting their lips, lifting their eyebrows and volumizing their eyelashes before the photo is even taken.

"I don't like how I look without them," she said. "Everyone uses them, you know?"

Similar functions are available on TikTok — even in live videos. There is virtually no social media platform where you're guaranteed to see real, unretouched faces anymore, which for many has fostered an environment in which posting a raw selfie feels like an act of bravery. The women who spoke to HuffPost described feeling like they need to Facetune their photos because everyone else is doing it, and if all the other women in their Instagram feeds look unnaturally good, they worry that they'll look worse by comparison if they *don't* Facetune.

"It would obviously be a lot easier if this wasn't necessary," Maxine said. "It sucks because in a perfect world, I wouldn't have to do this and other people wouldn't either."

An Endless Quest For Perfection

When Harmonie Christian was in high school, her biggest insecurities were her braces and her weight. As one of the only Black students at a predominantly white, all-girls school, where being skinny and being popular went hand-in-hand, Christian said, she always felt too curvy, so she mastered how to pose for photos to make herself appear as thin as possible. She'd heard that a few of her peers were starting to use Facetune and other apps to alter the shape of their bodies in their Instagram photos; at the time, she thought it was sad that they felt the need to do so. The most she would ever do to her pictures was apply filters to enhance the lighting or hue.

But once Christian got to college, it suddenly seemed like *everyone* was Facetuning, and it felt as if looking good on Instagram had become as important as looking good in real life. So she decided to give the app a chance. Like Maxine, she couldn't believe how much she could change about herself — or how much she liked the results. Today, her Facetune routine involves slimming her waist, widening her hips, enlarging her butt, whitening her teeth, smoothing her skin and thickening her eyelashes.

"Everyone in my feed Facetunes. After a while it felt like we were all just comparing our Facetune game rather than posting pictures of what we actually look like," said Christian, who's 22 and is launching an online graphic design business from Pittsburgh.

"I worry like, 'Oh my god, I'm gonna look like a catfish.' But I feel like if I'm not coming to Kylie Jenner-level of perfection on a photo, literally what is the point of posting it?"

nothing short of extraordinary — and simple to do. Just by sliding a dial, you can change the width of your head; the size of your jaw; the shape of your smile; the texture and tone of your skin; the size and position of your eyes, nose, lips and eyebrows; the color and clarity of your irises; the size of your pupils; and more. Manually, it's easy to reshape your body, hairline or any other features to your liking.

“Instagram used to be a fun place to post for your friends. Then everyone started looking like models.”

- Dawn, 22-year-old Facetune user

Tens of millions of Facetune users are now collectively creating new beauty standards on social media. They can be so overzealous in their editing that ridiculing their “Facetune fails” has become a hobby for people all over the internet. Groups like [r/Instagramreality](https://www.reddit.com/r/Instagramreality), a nearly 1 million-member subreddit, are awash with screenshots of ordinary women with waists that appear to be slimmer than their heads, backsides so round the background scenery seems to curve to accommodate them and skin textures retouched into oblivion.

For this story, six young women agreed to Facetune the same photo of a HuffPost reporter to resemble their personal perception of perfection.

The results varied to a degree but generally reflected what has become the ideal Instagram aesthetic: a tiny waist; blindingly white teeth; cartoonish hourglass curves; a small nose; full, lifted eyebrows; tanned, poreless skin; an angular jaw; and so on.



Six young women Facetuned the same photo of a HuffPost reporter to resemble their perception of perfection.

Multiple women said “perfect” to them looks like the Kardashian sisters, a standard so unattainable that even the Kardashians can’t meet it — at least, not the version of themselves they sell to young women on social media. Khloe Kardashian was embroiled in controversy last month after her team [went into a frenzy](#) threatening legal action to get an unretouched photo of her in a bathing suit taken offline.

The 36-year-old, who has accepted payments to [promote weight-loss products](#) and whose clothing brand, Good American, has the slogan “Representing Body Acceptance,” appeared in the picture to have a conspicuously less curvy figure than what she presents on Instagram. (Critics have [accused the Kardashians](#) of altering their appearances to resemble and commodify the bodies of Black women.)

It was a viral fiasco that ended with Kardashian [filming a live video of her body](#) to “show you all this isn’t photoshopped” and writing in a post that “the pressure, constant ridicule and judgment my entire life to be perfect and to meet other’s [sic] standards of how I should look has been too much to bear.”

Lane can empathize with that. She knows what it’s like to feel like you desperately *need* to look flawless, and she too has been shamed for Facetuning — both by random strangers on social media and her former roommate, who used to tell her, “You’re not as skinny as you’re trying to make people think you are.”

But it’s also hard for Lane to see Kardashian complain about the pressure to meet a standard that the celebrity herself has actively promoted and profited off.

“I felt bad for her, but the Kardashians are the ones that have really pushed these beauty expectations,” she said. “The more they promote these unrealistic ideals, the more pressure ordinary women will feel to Facetune themselves to look the same way.”

‘It’s Like A Drug’

Lauren Florio was one of Facetune’s earliest and most enthusiastic advocates. When she was a high school student struggling with anorexia and bulimia, the app gave her the skinniness she so badly wanted while helping her maintain an hourglass figure. She used to



their photos.



“I wish that I could go back and prevent myself from ever trying Facetune, because it’s so hard to stop,” said Florio, a 25-year-old grad student in San Diego. Her need to control her image has become so overpowering that she now even finds herself Facetuning the selfies she sends to her own mother and long-term partner.

“I get a lot of anxiety if someone else takes a photo on their phone of me, because I’m like, ‘You could post that and I have no idea what I look like,’” Florio said.





“It takes a lot of self-love not to sit and cry because you don’t have the waist of an Instagram model,” Lauren Florio said.

COURTESY OF LAUREN FLORIO

She’s been trying to cut back on Facetuning her Instagram photos lately, but she can’t imagine ever quitting altogether. She knows “for a fact” that using the app brings in far more traction on her posts. An expertly staged and Facetuned photo can get 2,000 “likes” or more, whereas a natural, “real-life” picture typically only gets 300, and leaves her aching to tweak and repost it.

“It’s hard deciding you’re going to do something positive for your mental health and edit less, then realizing no one likes that,” Florio said. “So you go back to Facetuning and all the ‘likes’ come back, and you tell yourself, ‘OK, I’ll just do it occasionally.’ It’s like a drug.”

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The instant gratification that comes from getting “likes” is [literally addictive](#), according to neuroscientists. When these notifications pop up on our smartphones, it releases dopamine — a brain chemical that makes us feel good — triggering the same kind of reaction one might get from gambling or doing drugs, and leaving us craving more.

In this sense, Facetune facilitates a more reliable and satisfying high by helping its users reel in more “likes.” For Instagram users like

plummet might feel like swapping out cocaine for espresso.

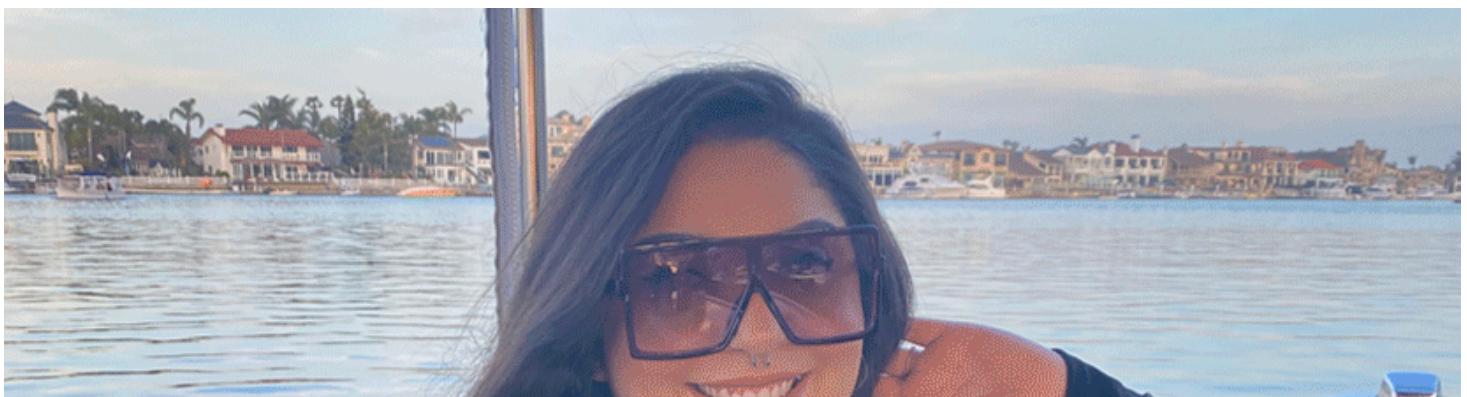
“As soon as I take a picture, I go straight to Facetune. I can’t help it.”

- Sabrina Arredondo, 24-year-old Facetune user

In the long term, this feedback cycle can be very damaging to one's mental health, warns Rachel Rodgers, a psychology professor at Northeastern University who's studying the harms associated with digitally altered photos.

“If you’re constantly being told that your outward appearance is a reflection of your inner self-worth, then when you’re posting something to social media that people are reacting to very positively, this is not only going to briefly boost your opinion of your appearance, it’s going to make you feel like you’re a better person overall for that short moment,” Rodgers said.

However, this “leaves you needing constant reassurance and overall undermines your self-image,” she added. “Even if there’s some short-term relief from getting the positive feedback from the ‘likes’ [on one post], that then leads to a higher bar for the next post, and then a worry if that post doesn’t do as well.”





Like so many other young women, Sabrina Arredondo says she's addicted to using Facetune.

COURTESY OF SABRINA ARREDONDO

For 24-year-old Sabrina Arredondo from Long Beach, posting an un-Facetuned photo to Instagram can cut her “likes” in half. She hasn’t been able to stop using the app since she downloaded it at age 19.

“As soon as I take a picture, I go straight to Facetune. I can’t help it,” she said. “If somebody posts a picture of me and I’m not Facetuned, I’m just like, ‘Oh my god, you’re sharing my secrets! I need to edit that.’”

Arredondo tries to keep her edits subtle, but she still feels nervous about meeting up with people from dating apps where she features

“What if I went too far and I look like a completely different person, and they’re like, ‘Whoa, you don’t look like your pictures?’” she said.

“Facetuning isn’t even something I think about anymore — I just do it.”

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For her part, Florio has unfollowed a bunch of Facetune-savvy Instagram models to lessen the temptation to use the app that comes from scrolling through her feed. She believes their addiction to Facetuning is even greater than the ordinary user’s because it’s tied not only to their sense of self-worth, but also to their income.

She got a taste of life as an influencer in college while earning brand deals to promote various items on her Instagram profile and YouTube channel. She knew she wasn’t just selling the products — she was selling her image, too. The better she looked, she thought, the more attention she’d get and the more paid partnerships she’d score.

“If you don’t look like you’re 5’8” and a size 2 you get insecure that you’re not going to keep your followers or you’re not going to make money that month,” Florio said. “You start to really overanalyze your appearance because it’s part of your business.”

Her attempts to wean herself off Facetune stem from a desire to protect not only her own mental health, but that of other women who may envy how she looks in her photos.

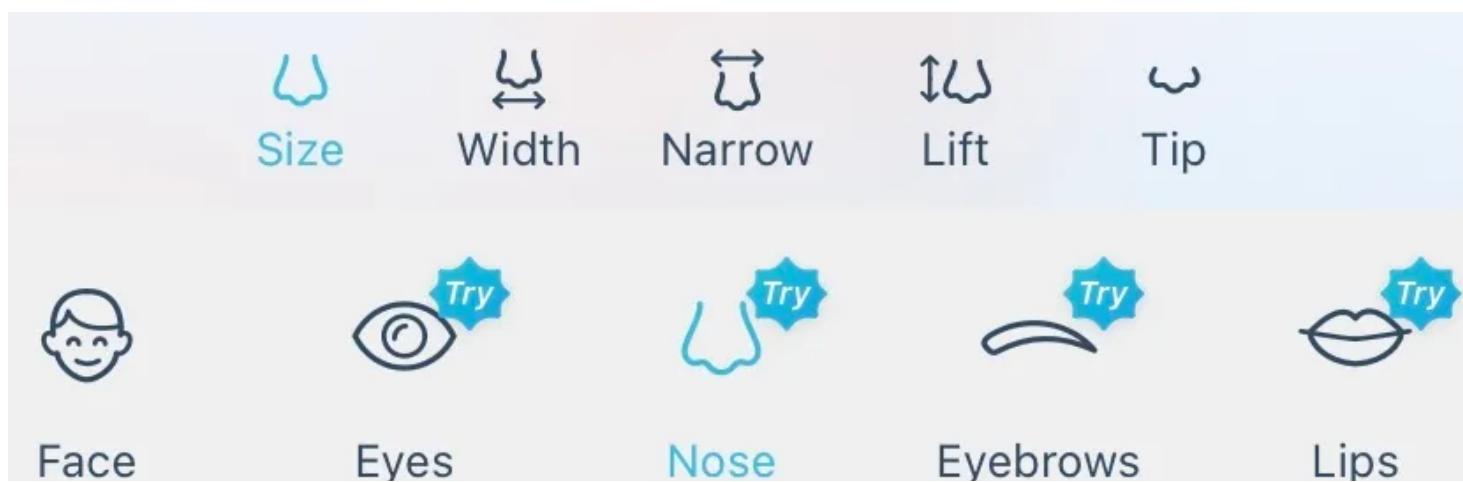
the day, I'm human and I feel self-conscious, too," said Fiono, who is studying to become a mental health counselor. "It's a trap. You're damned if you do and you're damned if you don't."

Facetune Dysmorphia

As Lightricks tells it, Facetune exists purely to boost users' confidence by augmenting their natural beauty and minimizing their perceived imperfections.

"There are users that DM us simply to tell us that they took the *best* photo of the *best* night and Facetune2 allowed them to zap away that pesky zit they didn't want to remember forever," a Facetune executive claimed in a [blog post](#). "There are those that write to us with stories of how Facetune2 makes them feel confident, like a rockstar on social media, instead of overwhelmed."

But this vision Facetune peddles of itself, like the selfies its users tweak to perfection, is hard to square with reality. Its features invite far more granular editing than simply zapping away a "pesky zit" or brightening a smile. (How many of us have ever independently felt the need to tilt the angle of our eye sockets by a few degrees? Why does the app have *five* separate functions for users to reshape their noses?)





Facetune's features make it extremely simple for users to meticulously edit their appearances.

FACETUNE

By design, these tools have led young women to fixate over supposed problems with their appearances that they'd never previously been concerned about.

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“I for sure notice a lot of my flaws more than I used to and I’m very critical of myself when I look in the mirror. Facetune has definitely amplified that,” said Dawn, a 22-year-old college student in Orange County, California, who hasn’t posted an un-Facetuned photo of herself since she downloaded the app in early 2018. “Instagram used to be a fun place to post for your friends. Then everyone started looking like models.”

It’s a feeling to which the other women can intimately relate. Some said that looking back, they wonder how they ever felt confident enough to post pictures of themselves before discovering Facetune, and how they had been so blind to the apparent imperfections in their appearances that Facetune has helped bring to their attention.

“I’ve always been insecure, but in

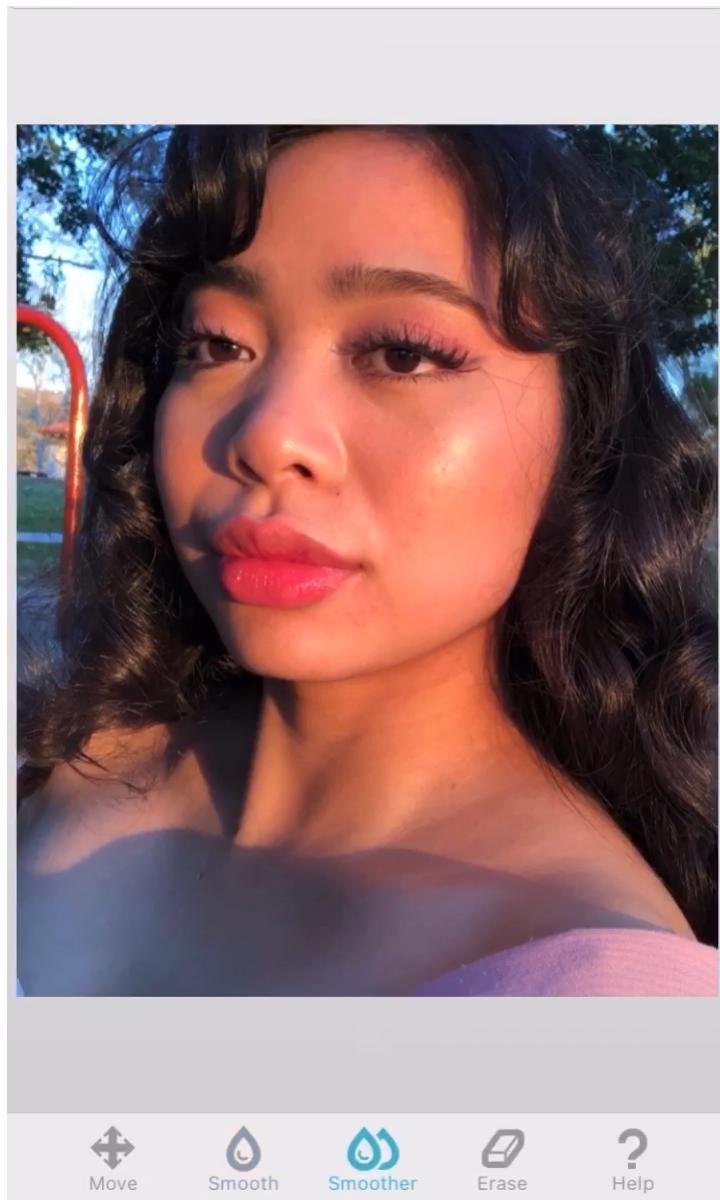
more shame about my appearance.”

- Harmonie Christian

There is a direct correlation between the proliferation of digitally manipulated selfies and body dysmorphic disorder, an underdiagnosed mental health condition causing sufferers to obsess over minor or imagined defects in their appearance, researchers at Boston University [found in 2018](#). They warned that Facetune and similar apps “are making us lose touch with reality because we expect to look perfectly primped and filtered in real life as well,” which can cause serious psychological harm.

Dawn has noticed some positive mental health outcomes from using Facetune. Before Facetune, she often shied away from posting close-up photos of her face online because she was insecure about her acne. Facetune made her feel comfortable enough to post selfies with a smoothed complexion, but it also gave her anxiety about seeing people in-person who might notice that her skin wasn’t as clear as it appeared to be on Instagram.

“It’s kind of sad, but because I had this tool to make me look a little more flawless, it was easier to be like, ‘This picture is perfect, I’m gonna post this,’ because I could fix my face,” said Dawn, who’s identified by her first name only to protect her privacy, and who also uses Facetune for creative purposes, such as enhancing her makeup looks.



Courtesy of Dawn
Dawn, 22, demonstrates how she uses Facetune to lightly edit photos of her face.

Although Lightricks advertises Facetune as users’ “little secret,” many in the online Facetune watchdog community are calling for transparency, and believe young women would feel far less desperate to look perfect if they knew which photos in their social media feeds had been altered.

France enacted [a law](#) in 2017 stipulating that digitally manipulated commercial images of models must be labeled as “retouchée”; lawmakers in the U.K. are considering a [similar bill](#). No such law



[THE ADVERTISING ACT](#), WHICH WOULD REQUIRE THE FEDERAL TRADE

Commission to regulate how advertisers “materially change the appearance and physical characteristics of the faces and bodies of the individuals depicted.”

Such legislation could have major implications for the influencer marketing world, where Instagram stars hawk billions of dollars’ worth of beauty and diet products to their followers with little-to-no oversight, but would be near-impossible to enforce. (Maybe it’s Maybelline, maybe it’s Facetune — how would the FTC know?)

Similar to government warnings on cigarette packs, though, Rodgers believes that adding labels to identify retouched photos would do little to prevent women from comparing themselves to the pictured models.

“In the worst cases this is actually unhelpful, because it increases the extent to which people engage in appearance comparisons, and they start looking at the image more closely,” she said.

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Several of the women in this story said they use Facetune so much that they can often recognize when others use it, too. But somehow, that still doesn’t make those other women’s photos seem less real — or curtail their own desire to keep Facetuning.

“My Facetuning has gotten so meticulous that by the time I’m done [editing a picture], I don’t even want to post it, because it doesn’t



be you! and I think, I want to be me here, too.



From Selfies To Surgeries

If you were to scroll through Florio's Instagram, you'd never know when she got her nose job. Online, her nose has looked the same for years — before and after the procedure.

"I psychotically would edit every photo of me to have the nose that I always wanted to have," said Florio, who's been Facetuning since high school.

She first got Botox as a teenager and lip fillers as a junior in college. That same year, she brought a Facetuned photo of her nose to her surgeon to turn it into a reality — something industry professionals describe as a booming trend.

But Facetune isn't just a planning tool for people who are already considering cosmetic surgery. A [study](#) published last year revealed that using Facetune actually instills and increases people's desire to go under the knife. And as surgeons like Dr. Michael Reilly, a co-author of the study, are finding, it can set them up for crushing disappointment.

"This is a race nobody can win. The standard is continually moving. You're never going to keep up."

- Rachel Rodgers, psychology professor at Northeastern University

In April, a woman in her 20s went to see Dr. Reilly at his practice in Washington, D.C., where he specializes in facial plastic surgery. Like

exactly how she wanted her nose to look. petite and refined, like the models on Instagram. This would be her fourth nose job, she explained; the others, performed by three different surgeons, had all left her unsatisfied.

Looking at the woman's nose, Dr. Reilly realized she had so little cartilage left that her desired result would likely be impossible to achieve, and perhaps always had been. When he told her he couldn't do it, she was devastated and initially refused to take "No" for an answer. Her behavior raised concerns that she could have an underlying body image condition, something Dr. Reilly is careful to screen for.

Cosmetic surgeries [can actually worsen the illness](#) of people with body dysmorphic disorder, which in severe cases may require psychological intervention as a treatment.

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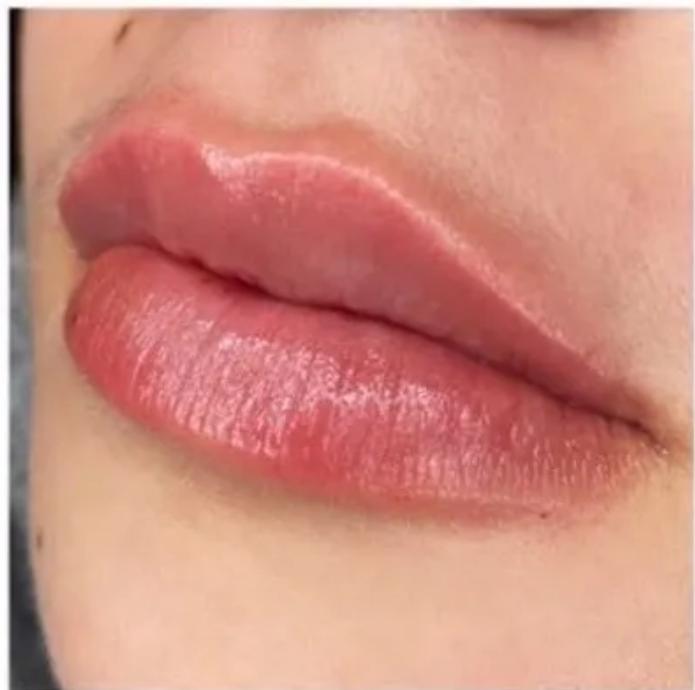
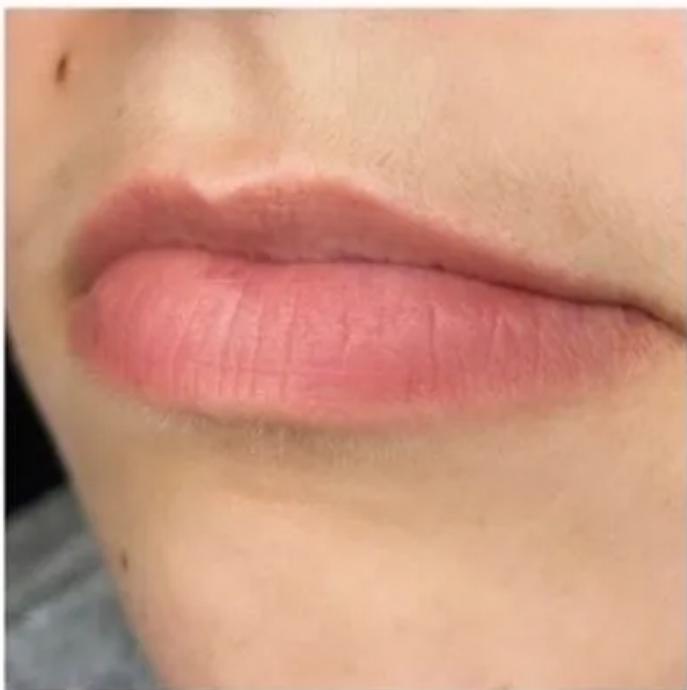
"The reason anyone should go into cosmetic surgery is because you like helping people feel good about themselves," said Dr. Reilly, who fears Facetune does the opposite by propagating unmeetable beauty expectations and, in turn, harming users' mental health.

The app's explosive rise has been a blessing and a curse in his industry; interest in cosmetic procedures is spiking, but shutting down patients' Facetune fantasies has become an increasingly common and upsetting part of surgeons' jobs.

even realizing it. Dr. Lee D. Daniel, an aesthetic plastic surgeon in

Eugene, Oregon, says about three-quarters of his patients show up with images of Instagram models they want to look like — who, unbeknownst to the patients, are heavily Facetuning or Photoshopping their pictures.

“Once or twice a week I’m having to tell patients, ‘If you want a waist that small, we’d have to take out a couple ribs,’” he said. “We’re seeing a whole generation [of women] who are being force-fed an idea of what they need to look like, and it’s just unrealistic.”



Sky Lane is saving up to get her lips done again, in addition to other procedures.

COURTESY OF SKY LANE

As Facetune becomes more popular, surgeons’ patients are starting to get younger.

“It used to be that you wouldn’t see cosmetic patients for anything other than rhinoplasty until they were 35,” Dr. Reilly said, “but now it’s



even teens come in for lip filler.



Lane was delighted with the results of her lip injections; she'd never been able to get her mouth to look quite right with Facetune. But as is standard with fillers, they have since dissolved, and she hasn't been able to afford new ones yet. She just bought a puppy and she's saving up for a car — and more procedures. In the meantime, Facetune gives her the look she wants. Likewise, Christian became so enamored with her Facetuned appearance that she, too, has looked into options to edit her face and body in real life.

"You want the nose, you want the fillers, you want the veneers, you want the boobs, there's just so many things," she said. "If I want to look as good as these people [on Instagram], I need to be able to afford all of this, so what all surgeries do I want to get?"

After spending so long Facetuning her backside to perfection, Christian seriously considered getting a Brazilian butt lift — a [notoriously dangerous](#) surgery in which fat is transferred to the butt from elsewhere in the body. The nearly \$10,000 price tag was daunting, but through diligent research, she learned that she could pay it off in installments using a credit card, "almost like a phone bill, but for your body."

"I'm telling you right now: This is going to get worse before it gets better."

- Dr. Philip Miller, surgeon at Gotham Plastic Surgery

Before long, Christian's Instagram Explore feed was teeming with BBL before-and-after shots and posts from surgeons offering the treatment at their clinics, making the temptation that much harder to

process, which, as she was disturbed to learn, can involve blood-tinged fluid oozing from the incisions in one's bottom, even staining and leaking through clothing.

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Despite the risks, she's not the only one considering the procedure. Multiple women featured in this story are thinking about or saving up for BBLs.

"I never wanted plastic surgery before, but once I started using Facetune and realized that it gives you the body figure a lot of girls want, I internalized that," Arredondo said. "Now I'll always find myself thinking, 'Oh man, if I could just get a BBL ...'"

As for her other desired procedures, Christian is just waiting for her business to take off. Veneers are at the top of her list when she has the money for them, followed by a boob job and then possibly a nose job. She and Lane have had ample time to think about their coveted surgeries and to test them out on Facetune during the COVID-19 shutdowns.



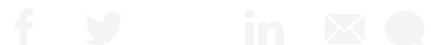


Since getting lip fillers and Botox, Sky Lane wants liposuction or cryolipolysis, a nonsurgical fat reduction treatment.

COURTESY OF SKY LANE

Compared to a year ago, toward the start of the pandemic, Dr. Miller in Manhattan says he now has about twice as many patients showing up with Facetuned pictures of themselves. One woman in her 20s had Facetuned a photo of her desired postoperative result so intensely that it would have required him to reconstruct her face almost entirely.

“She had slimmed her face so much that I would have had to move her eyeball orbits closer together and narrow her nose,” Dr. Miller recalled in disbelief. “I would have had to take like half of her nose



literally wanted me to bring her eyes closer together, which is just impossible.”

Looking ahead, Dr. Miller expects to field even more maddening requests from patients.

“I’m telling you right now,” he said, “this is going to get worse before it gets better.”

Where Does It End?

Once upon a time, editing a selfie for Instagram meant adding a sepia tone filter — perhaps “Valencia” or “Rise” — and calling it a day. #Perfect.

Today, the extraordinary lengths that an untold number of young women are going to in a desperate effort to look flawless on the platform are indicative of a mental health crisis — one fueled in no small part by Facetune and other apps like it.

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“I’ve always been insecure, but in this Facetune era, I feel so much more shame about my appearance,” Christian said.

“Sometimes when I go back to my original [un-Facetuned photos] I literally feel *bad*, I feel shame. I’m like, ‘No one can know I actually look like that.’”

more innovative tools capable of increasingly radical appearance enhancements. Last year, Lightricks launched Facetune Video, apparently its [most requested](#) feature, making it possible for users to film themselves while wearing their carefully constructed fantasy faces, too.

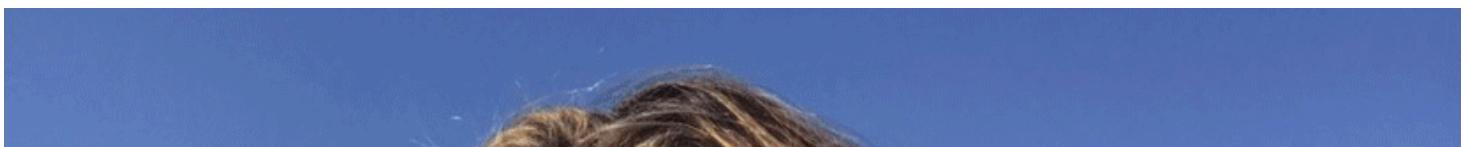
“This is a race nobody can win,” said Rodgers, the body image expert at Northeastern University. “The standard is continually moving. You’re never going to keep up.”

Other emerging tools, such as sister apps [PrettyUp](#) and [Perfect Me](#), are specifically designed to alter women’s body shapes on video — making it simple to elongate their legs, widen their hips, shrink their waists and enlarge their butts while they’re moving around. (“Don’t want to go back to the gym?” Perfect Me asks on its [Facebook page](#). “One click [sic] to have perfect abs, slim waist and long legs!”)

The results are alarmingly convincing: A wannabe fitness influencer could easily use either app to digitally sculpt herself a perfect figure then parade around on-camera selling dietary supplements or workout routines to envious, oblivious followers.

Omari from [@igfamousbydana](#) suspects that’s already happening. The extent to which women are altering their online appearances in pursuit of perfection is disturbing to her.

“It almost feels like all these women are building avatars for their social media personas that look nothing like them in real life,” she said. “We don’t all need to look the same, but that definitely seems to be where we’re headed.”





"I feel guilty about editing my posts, because people look at me and they're like, 'Oh, she looks so beautiful, I want to look like that!' But *I* don't even look like that," Lauren Florio said.

COURTESY OF LAUREN FLORIO

As Facetune users both push and chase beauty standards further and further away from reality, some are cracking under the pressure to keep up.

Christian recently deleted Facetune. She's tried to quit before, but she said this time feels different. The app is extremely detrimental to

Facetuned photos, she herself is promoting unrealistic beauty standards and contributing to a body dysmorphia epidemic harming other young women — like her little sister.

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“I know how much it hurts to compare myself to others, and I wouldn’t want anyone to compare themselves to me when my pictures aren’t even real,” she said. “I’m trying to lean away from Facetune and toward body positivity, but it’s very hard when you see it all the time. With every post, I’m still just tempted to slim down my legs or widen my hips, or do this or that, just a little.”

The 22-year-old hit a breaking point over the pandemic, when she was locked down inside and spending even more time on Instagram obsessively looking at pictures of “IG baddies” with perfect bodies. It made her loathe her own body so much that she lost 30 pounds in three months, desperate to look like the women in her feed, even though she was certain that they used Facetune, too. But when she looked in the mirror, her reflection still wasn’t good enough.

“I couldn’t even be happy about the weight I’d lost, because I still didn’t look like them,” she said, starting to cry.

“I have to ask myself: ‘Do I really want to feel this way for the rest of my life?’”

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