

## COSMOPOLITAN

### How nose jobs went viral

Charlotte Bitmead | August 6, 2024



Every time I opened my phone, there they were. Noses. Button-shaped ones, ski slopes, noses ‘before’ and noses suddenly ‘after’.

Noses sculpted, shaped and (mostly) made smaller. The surgeon’s knife was, seemingly, an instant filter – no fuss, no pain, just the nose I’d spent my teens dreaming of. Or so it appeared.

All I’d done was a couple of searches for #rhinoplasty and #nosejob and, overnight, the algorithm got to work. By morning, my whole feed was #nosejobcheck videos of bandaged-up faces turning into cutesy princess noses, and clips entitled, ‘Come with me to get my nose job in Turkey.’ It all seemed so... easy. There was none of the nip/tuck- style gore that had put me off when I was a teenager. Had I been tricked into thinking nose jobs were more of a big deal than they are? The content I was suddenly being shown on TikTok certainly made me think so... and, here I was, aged 28, questioning whether it was time to take the plunge.

It all began in 2005. I desperately wanted Sophia Bush’s nose and cursed my own flat and overly curved one. I’d quote *Clueless* in the playground on my lunch break (‘My plastic surgeon doesn’t want me doing any activity where balls fly at my nose’) and the tabloids were constantly speculating about which celebrities had, or hadn’t, had nose jobs. From the ages of 10 to 16, to me, a nose job was the ultimate status symbol. But the surgery looked *terrifying* and it was way beyond anything I could save for with my pocket money.

Fast forward to my 20s and I'd left my nose insecurities behind, and so, it seemed, had the rest of society. Instead, 'tweakments' had taken over. Why go under the knife when you can get filler injected to straighten out your nose in your lunch break for a fraction of the price? But recently, working as a beauty journalist, I've noticed that there's been a nose-job renaissance. First, I was at a work event and overheard two influencers discussing their 'nose folders'. They scrolled through videos, debating which facial features reigned supreme. And it wasn't just them: according to The British Association of Aesthetic Plastic Surgeons, cosmetic procedures grew in popularity by 102% in 2022 compared with the previous year, with rhinoplasties leading in popularity with a 72% increase. As for the reason behind that increase? It *could* be attributed, in part, to social media. When I first started researching for this feature, #rhinoplasty and #nosejob both had over 5bn views each on TikTok. Sixteen weeks later, they're closing in on 9bn.

One face that crops up time and time again, while scrolling, as having a seemingly 'aspirational nose' is that of model Cindy Kimberly. So much so that plastic surgeon Sami Moubayed named a rhinoplasty technique after her in his clinic, Clinique Face MD, because she was requested so frequently. Social media has unintentionally become co-opted as a catalogue for surgery by users, with many of us 'saving' our dream noses and even taking it further by surgicing our way to a real-life filter.

### **GRWM to get surgery**

Rachel\* had always been insecure about her C-shaped nose. She simply wanted to correct a bump from being elbowed in the face as a kid. Her nose inspiration? 'Just some random girls off TikTok,' she says. 'I wanted my nose to look like it had a filter on.' She was 21 when she went under the knife. She admits she was 'stupid' when picking a surgeon. 'My friend's doctor's waiting time was too long, so I found another through social media, quickly looked on their page and booked.' This doctor didn't require a lengthy consultation beforehand – only a few questions in a matter of minutes, on the day of the surgery itself. While not malpractice in a legal sense, there's certainly a moral negligence in these sorts of process short cuts. 'I didn't want to change the tip of my nose, but my surgeon did.' The result? A nose that, she says, 'doesn't suit her' and, while she didn't experience any complications, she still describes the recovery as 'traumatic'. Rachel is a marketing student and thinks of herself as a victim of the very thing she's studying. 'It's just exploiting people's insecurities to make money,' she says, before adding, 'I would do anything for the nose I had before.' Since the surgery, Rachel has posted videos about her experience and seen her engagement increase. 'The videos about my nose job have definitely gone more viral.'

Like Rachel, users I come across reference TikTok as their primary resource for surgery content, not Google. 'I did my research – I watched a lot of TikTok videos,' user @luzdehierba tells her followers. While her average videos get 5k views, her nose job videos average 30k. When we reached out to TikTok, a spokesperson told us that its community guidelines include strict rules on medical misinformation and cosmetic surgery, and that content that shows or promotes cosmetic surgery without a risk warning is ineligible for the 'For You' feed, and is restricted for users under 18.



How did nose jobs go viral

A rhinoplasty is the number one operation I perform,’ plastic surgeon Yannis Alexandrides tells me. When I describe the content I’m seeing on TikTok – particularly how seamless the surgery appears – he quickly interjects, ‘I can’t emphasise the recovery, the severity of the operation or the potential risks enough.’ Social media content appears to gloss over some important truths (no surprise there). He tells me it can take a full year to recover and you can experience ‘swelling, bruising, loose skin around the nose, bleeding and you need to wear a splint for at least a week’. When I enquire about a worst-case scenario, he describes seeing noses that have been ‘over-resected’, meaning ‘that a lot has been removed from the inside of the nose and it’s collapsed’.

A lot of his work includes patients trying to fix the results of a previous rhinoplasty or, in other words, clearing up other surgeons’ messes. ‘A lot of surgeons don’t have enough experience. A rhinoplasty is ranked as one of the most difficult surgeries to master.’ If they are so hard to get right, why is there such a resurgence on social media? ‘A rhinoplasty is a very visual operation, where the results can be so dramatic and pleasing, so it’s no surprise to me that it has become so popular online,’ he says.

He believes there are other issues with this type of content. ‘Clients used to bring in pictures of actresses and famous singers – now they have access to influencers, but the problem is that a lot of their pictures have been altered or have filters on and I have to explain to them that’s not a real nose, it’s artificial,’ Dr Alexandrides tells me. (Literally) unrealistic beauty standards at such a young age can take their toll mentally and, considering one in four TikTok users are under 20 years old, this could have contributed to a change in the average age in plastic surgeons’ waiting room, too. A 75% spike in demand from clients under 30 was reported last year, and Dr Alexandrides has seen this in his clinic. But he stresses the importance of not getting surgery until after the age of 18. Before this, he says, ‘the nose hasn’t fully developed yet. So unless your breathing is impaired, it’s better to wait.’ But what happens when the pressure around you, both in real life and whenever you open your phone, becomes so intense that you feel waiting is impossible?

## The TikTok nose

‘I wanted to look as white as possible,’ Isabella\* tells me. She was 15 when she started getting bullied because of her nose. ‘I’m Latin American and grew up in Australia, so I couldn’t see myself represented in the media. When I hit high school, I realised people saw my ethnicity before anything else and I started to hate the way I looked.’ By 16, she’d decided to get the surgery, and got her first job to begin saving for it. At 19, she underwent the procedure eight months after her consultation. ‘I shouldn’t have been allowed to make that kind of permanent decision about my body, I was so young,’ she says. Isabella believes social media plays a huge role. ‘I’d use it to justify what the bullies said. I felt that if I didn’t reach the beauty standard set on social media, I’d never be successful,’ she says. She used videos as a resource, which ‘desensitised’ her to the invasive surgery. ‘I saw it all over my feeds: “Oh, you don’t like this about yourself? You can change it overnight,” and it fed into my obsession,’ she says.

She wanted a ‘Disney princess nose’ (aka ski-sloped) and it felt ‘like my life depended on it; I wanted my nose gone’. Despite her certainty, she knew she’d made a mistake immediately. ‘As soon as he took the cast off, I regretted it. I cried and told him it was from happiness. I was so disappointed. That was my life’s savings,’ she says. It wasn’t just the aesthetics; Isabella now can’t breathe out of her nose and still experiences bleeding when she sneezes. ‘It’s a daily reminder of how I let other people’s opinions determine my worth,’ she says. Six years on, she’s still not at peace. ‘I still take pictures and expect to see my old face. Sometimes I look in the mirror and don’t recognise myself,’ she says. This is a feeling Rachel has also experienced. ‘Someone told me, “You’re going to have an identity crisis afterwards,” and I felt like it wouldn’t happen to me,’ she says, before shrugging. ‘You never do, until it does.’

Both Isabella and Rachel have recorded honest TikToks of their experiences (Isabella’s currently sits at around 1.5m views). But it’s the seemingly successful surgeries that still rule on the platform (during my own scrolling, they outnumbered the more negative videos). While some surgeries go well, and help reduce insecurities, Dr Alexandrides says that the short-clip nature of platforms such as TikTok means that the reality of the procedure and aftercare is not seen. But could there be another reason for creators glossing over the less-than-rosy side of rhinoplasty?

‘[Some surgeries] offer free consultations to people who mention influencers’ names and [the influencers] earn a commission,’ Ashley Stobart, cohost of the ***Nip, Tuck, Not Giving A...*** podcast, tells me. She makes her living from talking about surgery and has racked up 66k followers on Instagram through doing so. She also worked in cosmetic surgery for more than a decade, before getting a nose job herself. She ‘absolutely loves’ her nose, but is incredibly wary of social media’s role in people’s decision-making. ‘I don’t [talk about my surgery] to glamourise it, I do it because people must understand it’s not to be taken lightly,’ Ashley says. She also gets called out for not sharing her surgeon’s name. And Rachel claims that her surgeon has told her he would offer discounts to anyone who mentioned her name when booking.

While there’s nothing technically wrong with this, it’s arguably a moral grey area. ‘I think that it’s highly irresponsible [for me to do that],’ she says. Other surgeons have also approached Ashley for collaborations, but she’s turned them down for the same reason. When I ask her how she feels about this content on TikTok, she immediately responds, ‘I don’t want my surgeon to be

doing TikToks, I want my surgeon to be at conferences and seeing patients.’ Of course, surgery content is not exclusive to TikTok, with similar content being found on other platforms, too.

Ashley’s podcast spreads awareness about the severity of these procedures. ‘I get people that message me who haven’t done their research. It’s scary that you can make a call and go into surgery a week later,’ she says. She even describes seeing one girl lose part of her nose after a nose job got infected: ‘People need to be aware that these surgeries can destroy people.’ Board-certified facial plastic and reconstructive surgeon **Kimberly Lee** believes, if done right, social media *can* play a positive role in the world of surgery: ‘Increased awareness about cosmetic procedures and results can help individuals make informed decisions.

It creates communities to share experiences and support, but the biggest impact is the accessibility, education and information that’s easily available,’ she says. On the other hand, misinformation is a concern. ‘Inaccurate information spread by people who aren’t experts or credentialed to do these procedures can lead to unrealistic expectations, misunderstandings about procedures and downplayed risks,’ she adds. TikTok uses a combination of technologies and moderation teams to identify, review and, where appropriate, remove content or accounts that violate its guidelines, which includes the spreading of medical misinformation.

Society tells us not to give in to the pressure to look a certain way, but I couldn’t stop focusing on my side profile in the mirror after being consumed by these videos. However, change could be afoot when it comes to the algorithm, with TikTok telling us that it is investing in diversifying recommendations, interrupting repetitive patterns and allowing users to filter out videos with specific words or hashtags. ‘This constant exposure to surgically enhanced photos can contribute to unrealistic beauty standards, lower self-esteem and body dysmorphia,’ Dr Lee says.

## One size fits all?

The idea of looking at myself in the mirror and not recognising who was staring back at me was something I hadn’t considered. Yet, it seemed to be a common theme when I spoke to those post-op (one even described it as having a ‘grief for your past self’). But even more off-putting for me, the more I scrolled and scrolled, was the idea that by picking my face, effectively from a catalogue that millions of other people have also been browsing, I’d end up looking the same as everyone else. Isabella describes wanting to ‘copy and paste’ a model’s nose on to her own, and the stream of content on social media adds to this. All the videos I saw had a uniform nose that was petite, sloped and subtly pointed. If plastic surgery keeps booming, could we enter into some sort of dystopia in which we all have the exact same face?

Ellen Atlanta, author of ***Pixel Flesh: How Toxic Beauty Culture Harms Women***, believes that the rise of the 2010s ‘duck pout’ in the age of filler has proven this is already happening. ‘What lips were to Instagram, noses and side profiles are to TikTok [and Reels], as we move increasingly into video content that requires a more 3D view of our faces,’ she says. A study analysed the faces of 50 models and influencers with the widest social reach according to Instagram follower count, and found 86% had full lips, while 78% displayed a straight and upturned nose. Normalising surgical extremes reinforces the idea that the faces we’re born with are just ‘prototypes’, she fears. This creates a severe class and race divide, not only between those who can and can’t afford these surgeries but for those who greater resemble this ideal beauty standard to begin with.

**Bella Hadid** made headlines when she admitted that she regretted getting a nose job at 14. ‘I wish I had kept the nose of my ancestors,’ she told *Vogue*. It sparked a huge online discussion, with user @miramargiela commenting, ‘It makes me sad. We’re out here being conditioned from the dawn of colonisation to think that Eurocentric features are the pinnacle of beauty.’ Isabella can relate to this kind of pressure. ‘My surgeon told me, “I don’t want to take away your ethnicity,” and I told him I didn’t care, take it away,’ she says. Something she admits is ‘heartbreaking’ upon reflection. It seems we’re trapped in a vicious cycle; one in which the algorithm favours certain beauty ideals and serves them to young minds constantly, resulting in a warped sense that there is only one kind of beauty, and the only way to escape bullying (by others, and ourselves) is to change our appearance.

We can’t blame people for feeling this pressure, but, at the same time, I don’t think going anti-surgery is the solution. Not only are we too deeply entrenched, where it’s so normalised, but also because we should have the right to do what we want with our own faces. I did speak to a number of people for this feature who were happy with their nose jobs but, interestingly, I found a common thread among them. One of those was Evelyn\*, who says she knew that, ‘A nose job wouldn’t fix all my insecurities.’ She also didn’t decide to get surgery until her mid- 20s, which could be a factor as to why she ‘couldn’t be happier with [her] nose and experience.’ She adds, ‘My confidence has skyrocketed.’ Unlike others I’d spoken to, Evelyn says that she ‘never wanted to look like someone else, just a slightly elevated version of myself’.

We all mature at different ages, but it seems that a few extra years to consider the surgery affects satisfaction with the outcome, as does analysing the driving force behind why you want your nose job. After all, our faces shouldn’t be a trend. We all need to be more aware of the reality behind these procedures, and while no one should be stigmatised for wanting to have surgery, with the number of young people seeking it out increasing, the question is, should these procedures come with a psychological assessment to understand the gravity of the situation? But this has raised other concerns as to whether this could take away agency from people with mental health conditions.

As for me, it took being inundated with replicas of man-made noses to truly appreciate the fact that no one has the one I was born with. For all its faults, it’s unique. The world would look duller if we were all interchangeable, and the AI version of my nose created with a filter now doesn’t seem that intelligent to me, after all.

<https://www.cosmopolitan.com/uk/beauty-hair/a61497152/how-nose-jobs-went-viral/>