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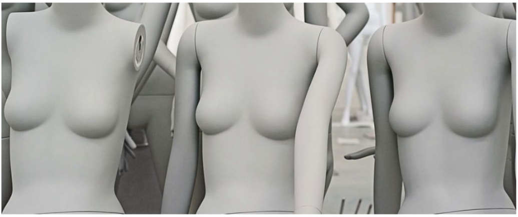
As the number of plastic surgeries increases each year, debates about self-image and consumerism intensify

Stéfani Fontanive / 1 de novembro de 2023 / In English



Society | With the constant exposure of photoshopped pictures in social media, body and image become products, especially among women

**By Stéfani Fontanive*

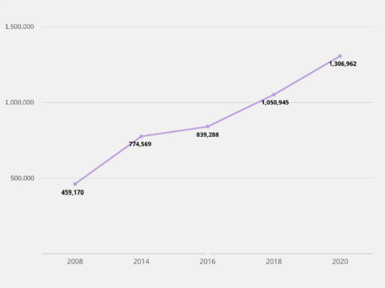
**First published Febuary 9, 2023*

**Photo: Michela Berruzzi CC2*

"My dream", "Beautiful", You're perfect", "You go, girl". Comments like these flood posts with pictures in a Facebook group that shares information about plastic surgeries. With daily posts that include miraculous pills to lose weight, medical recommendations, loans offer to pay for the surgeries and accounts of the process of the procedures, the group has more than 26 thousand members.

The major presence of women, the comments admitting that they dream of plastic surgeries with similar results and the stories of patients demonstrate a scenery already known: a spike of interest in plastic surgeries in Brazil. According to the major institution of aesthetic surgeries in the country, *Sociedade Brasileira de Cirurgia Plástica* (SBCP), 459 thousand plastic surgeries were performed between 2007 and 2008. The most recent data of the International Society of Aesthetic Plastic Surgery (ISAPS) reveals that 1.306.962 plastic surgeries were made in Brazil in 2020.

Number of cosmetic surgeries in Brazil



Sources: Brazilian Society of Plastic Surgery and International Society of Aesthetic Plastic Surgery

Reconstructive surgery vs. Cosmetic surgery

The data shown above includes only cosmetic surgeries, however, there are two types of plastic surgery – cosmetic or reconstructive. Virgínia Piúma Pólvora, medical expert in plastic surgery and member of the SBCP, explains that "the reconstructive surgery aims to solve problems when unwanted functional alterations exist," while in the cosmetic surgery "there isn't a pathological situation, but there are issues of social functioning, self-esteem, and self-image".

However, there are cases in which surgery is simultaneously cosmetic and reconstructive. "There is the junction of both aspects," Virgínia explains, "in cases of breast cancer, where there is the pathological side of the disease, and also the self-image of the woman. Other cases are of sexual reassignment surgeries," the doctor points out.

Plastic surgeries originally arose for reconstructive functions. According to the ***Brazilian Society of Plastic Surgery***, the first records of procedures aiming to change physical appearance date back to the sixth century, located in today's India. Details of the procedures made at the time are present in the texts known as Sushruta Samhita, attributed to the founder of medicine **Ayurveda**.

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However, modern plastic surgeries had their major advancement during World War I (1914 – 1918), with **Harold Gilles**, considered the father of this medical specialty. The doctor realized that, besides curing the wounded, it was necessary to give a "normal" appearance to them. With the evolution of the procedure, the same techniques started to be used to improve appearance, arising, thus, the cosmetic plastic surgery, of which we presented data at the beginning of this article.

Initially, the procedures were expensive and exclusive to the wealthy elites, but, according to SBCP, it has become more popular due to Hollywood stars that adhered to these surgeries. Among the 1950s and 1960s, the most common surgeries used to be rhinoplasty and facelifts, procedures that aim to reduce aging marks, such as expression lines and wrinkles.

A *dream come true* procedure

Rhinoplasty remains, from the 40s to today, as one of the most popular plastic surgeries. According to the most recent data from ISAPS, Brazil is the number one country in the world that makes this procedure, which were 87.879 in 2020, followed by Turkey, with 66.950, and the United States, with 55.436.

Dance student Paula Trodo Degrazia, 20 years old, was one of the people who have undergone rhinoplasty. "I had problems with my nose since childhood," the student said, as she desired to undergo the procedure since she was 13 years old. "My nose wasn't that big, but it had a lump that bothered me a lot. Most people didn't see any problem with it. When I told them I wanted rhinoplasty, they used to say: but your nose is so beautiful".

The young woman consulted with several doctors, and, in the process, found out a deviated septum and other respiratory problems that needed to be fixed. Because of this, she needed an otolaryngologist specialized in plastic surgery. "I consulted with a lot of doctors to get to know their 'vibe' before I decided who to choose. For some doctors I had previously seen, it looked like it was just an automated labor: get in, make the nose, get out. The care and sincerity of the doctor I chose formed a distinguishing profile".

When choosing a "new nose", she says she was afraid that it would not match the rest of her face. In the process, the doctor photographs the patient from various angles and, in an image editing application, simulates the result. Paula and the doctor chose only to remove the "bump" that bothered her, and not to thin her nose or leave it a snub nose, a common trend in plastic surgeries. "We had the same vision about what would work best for my face," says the student.

Paula doesn't remember much about her recovery from the surgery, only that she needed to take several medications. In preparation for the procedure, she reported that the doctor explained the whole process, the risks of the surgery, and the pre- and post-operative care. "I don't regret the surgery one bit," she says.

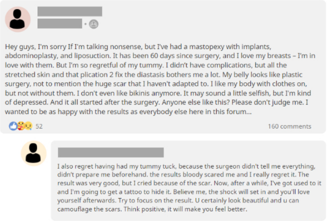
Fears and risks

Like any procedure, plastic surgery has indications, risks and benefits and requires intense post-operative care. But many patients claim not to have been properly warned about all these points, says the professor of the Department of Anthropology of UFRGS Fabíola Rohden, who researches on the subject. Fabíola also talked to doctors, who, in turn, stated that, even explaining all the steps, many patients did not care about these issues.

By observing the reports of those who have undergone surgery in Facebook groups, two different realities are perceived. The fear of the risks of surgery is not a recurring topic in Facebook groups focused on the subject. One participant asked the others about how to deal with fears and have the courage to perform the procedure. Most of the responses were encouraging to surgery. "Every surgery has a risk, we have to trust in God's will," said one participant. "You should be afraid of jumping off a bridge, but for surgery, all you need is money. I was scared, and I did it anyway, now I want to do three more, the problem is that I don't have any money," said another.

When the doctor warns about potential problems, some participants show dissatisfaction. In one of the comments, one of them complained about the doctor with whom she had consulted. "He scared me by saying that there was a risk of thrombosis," she wrote. In the answers, some women explained that it was the doctor's duty to report all the risks, while others agreed that there was no need, because it only frightened those who sought the procedure.

In one of the reports, the patient states that she regretted the surgery because the doctor did not prepare her for the scar that would be on her belly. Fabíola says that, in some cases, "if the patients had a more enlightening conversation with the doctor or read articles that value human and body diversity, surgery could have been avoided."



[redacted]

Hey guys, I'm sorry If I'm talking nonsense, but I've had a mastopexy with implants, abdominoplasty, and liposuction. It has been 60 days since surgery, and I love my breasts – I'm in love with them. But I'm so regretful of my tummy. I didn't have complications, but all the stretched skin and that plication 2 fix the diastasis bothers me a lot. My belly looks like plastic surgery, not to mention the huge scar that I haven't adapted to. I like my body with clothes on, but not without them. I don't even like bikinis anymore. It may sound a little selfish, but I'm kind of depressed. And it all started after the surgery. Anyone else like this? Please don't judge me. I wanted to be as happy with the results as everybody else here in this forum...

52

160 comments

[redacted]

I also regret having had my tummy tuck, because the surgeon didn't tell me everything, didn't prepare me beforehand. the results bloody scared me and I really regret it. The result was very good, but I cried because of the scar. Now, after a while, I've got used to it and I'm going to get a tattoo to hide it. Believe me, the shock will set in and you'll love yourself afterwards. Try to focus on the result. U certainly look beautiful and u can camouflage the scars. Think positive, it will make you feel better.

In the plastic surgery groups on Facebook, confessions about the postoperative period are common (Reproduction)

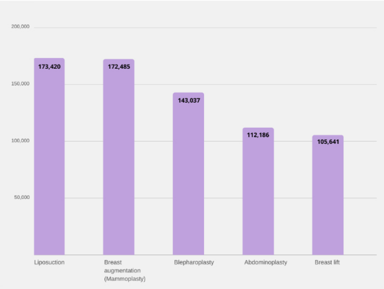
Virgínia recalls that the patient also has responsibilities for undergoing the procedure. "Pre-operative assessment is very important so that the patient is not deluded, that he/she really searches for judicious and realistic sources before doing any surgical procedure."

In preparation for surgery, there is a list of necessary tests, such as anesthesia tests, blood count, and heart exams. Among the risks of undergoing plastic surgery there are complications that also occur in other surgical procedures, such as thrombosis, infection, and rupture of the stitches, in addition to keloids, which are protruding scars. "It is essential to know how to contraindicate surgery when the risks outweigh the benefits," says the surgeon.

The numbers of plastic surgery

Despite all the risks, in 2019, Brazil was the country that performed the most plastic surgeries in the world. In the most recent data, from 2020, the country fell to the second position, behind only the United States, which performed 1,485,116 surgical procedures. Worldwide, women's preferred surgery is breast augmentation, but in Brazil, it is liposuction.

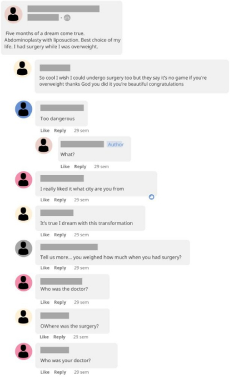
Most performed procedures in Brazil in 2020



Source: International Society of Aesthetic Plastic Surgery (ISAPS)

Liposuction is an operation that seeks to remove fat from different places on the body, usually performed with an instrument similar to a vacuum cleaner. Despite being the preferred surgery of Brazilian women, in the list of non-surgical procedures aimed at weight loss, Brazil does not appear in the 10 countries that most seek these techniques.

Virgínia explains that, in fact, the focus of liposuction is not weight loss. "Liposuction is indicated to improve the outline, to treat lipodystrophies [abnormal fat disposition in the body] of the patient who is not obese." "There are more risks in operating obese patients," says the doctor. In the surgery groups, however, there is an exchange of contacts of doctors who perform the procedures even if the patient is not at the appropriate weight for the operation.



[redacted]
[redacted]

Five months of a dream come true. Abdominoplasty with liposuction. Best choice of my life. I had surgery while I was overweight.

[redacted]

So cool I wish I could undergo surgery too but they say it's no game if you're overweight thanks God you did it you're beautiful congratulations

[redacted]

Too dangerous

[redacted] Author

What?

[redacted]

I really liked it what city are you from

[redacted]

It's true I dream with this transformation

[redacted]

Tell us more... you weighed how much when you had surgery?

[redacted]

Who was the doctor?

[redacted]

OWhere was the surgery?

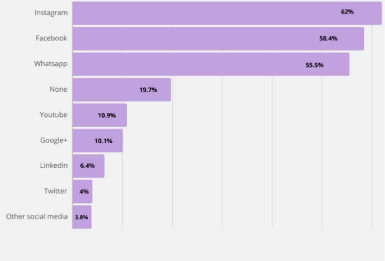
[redacted]

Who was your doctor?

In the groups, the participants exchange indications of doctors and information about the preparation for the surgeries (Reproduction)

There are different reasons for the 184.6% increase in surgeries between 2008 and 2020. Virgínia points out, as possible reasons, the increase in medical schools, medical residencies in plastic surgery and professionals. "Decreasing costs and greater access to the population are also contributing factors." The surgeon also brings two other points: the greater promotion of surgeries and the larger presence of doctors and clinics in social media.

Of the doctors associated with SBCP, according to the last census carried out by the entity in 2018, 60.2% of professionals use Instagram as a form of communication. 58.4% of these professionals are on Facebook. However, 19.7% are not on any social media.



Source: Brazilian Society of Plastic Surgery

Social media and the vision of the self

In the first episode of Fleabag, the main character and her sister are attending a lecture. The stage speaker asks a question: "Please raise your hand if you would trade five years of your life for the so-called 'perfect body.'" Fleabag and her sister are the only ones raising their hands, and the character says "we are bad feminists." Although one of the guidelines of feminism is the acceptance of the body, women have long been taught to hate themselves and to pursue the so-called perfect body.

"Aesthetics has always been aimed at women," says Nísia Martins do Rosário, a professor at the Faculty of Library Science and Communication at UFRGS and a researcher on bodies in communication. She recalls that, throughout history, beauty standards have always fallen on women's bodies, from the use of corsets in the 19th century to current plastic surgeries.

In recent years, with the increase of social media, there has also been an increase in the posting of photoshopped pictures. According to researchers Fabíola and Nísia, there is a beauty standard to be pursued: the white, thin and young body. Nísia points out that "there is little room for diversity of bodies: there is a standard body that must be reached to be considered acceptable". The researcher adds that by constantly being in contact with something, the more it becomes the standard and the more it is pursued. "The more you repeat something, the more you are in contact with someone or with a product, the more you seek to resemble them".

On social media, before and after plastic surgery photos, as well as diary videos of surgeries, have become common. The report of the liposuction and silicone procedure by influencer Virgínia Fonseca, who has 11.3 million subscribers in her YouTube channel, and 41.1 million followers on Instagram, has 5 million views. In the video, the 23-year-old girl appears walking and laughing. The video was posted in 2018. In 2020, she did another procedure, called HD liposuction, a high-definition liposuction, which she also documented on her channel.

The comedian and influencer Gessica Kayane, known as Gkay, became the main subject in different reports because of her plastic surgeries, in addition to having the results criticized on social media. In 2019, she documented her rhinoplasty in a video posted on her YouTube channel. The body and the image became a product: "There is a publicization of the image of oneself," Fabíola points out.

MD Virgínia notes that there is a problem when influencers downplay the risks or romanticize the procedures. "Minimizing or omitting the risks is contributing to misinformation," the doctor says.

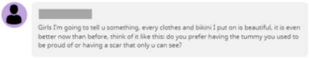
Researchers Fabíola and Nísia remember, however, that this body posted on social media is not natural. There are filters and manipulation of images. "Photos need to be improved to be able to post on social media," says the anthropologist.

Photo editing as a tool for simulating the outcome of surgery is a common practice. Singer Anitta, for example, told the Spanish channel CuatroTV in 2019 that she took an edited photo of her face to the plastic surgeon to show how she would like to look in real life.

"There is a search for a perfection that is not achievable because it is not a real perfection," comments Nísia. The praise for the 'perfect body', the 'at-all-costs' quest for it and even the rationale behind cosmetic surgery combine to indicate a non-acceptance of oneself and the own body. "If I accept my body, why do I need to have plastic surgery?" reflects Nísia. Fabíola also adds, "how does a satisfactory identification process occur when you have such a distorted image of yourself?".

For the plastic surgeon, "the most important point is that plastic surgery brings many benefits when it is properly indicated, and when you have, on the one hand, a good patient, who searches for information, and on the other hand, a good doctor, who will know how to diagnose and indicate the correct procedure".

"People have the right to try to feel good and transform themselves, but we see situations in which this is experienced as a great grief and pressure, such as reports to please their partner", reflects Fabíola, noting that "the weight of certain types of gender patterns differentially affect men and women".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Girls I'm going to tell u something, every clothes and bikini I put on is beautiful, it is even better now than before, think of it like this: do you prefer having the tummy you used to be proud of or having a scar that only u can see?

In a Facebook group, some patients report satisfaction with the body after surgery (Reproduction)

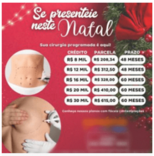
Patient or consumer?

In her research, Fabíola brings a reflection on the consumer society: the transformation of those who undergo plastic surgery from patient to consumer of these services. "I can have the breast I want, the ass I want, the skin I want. That is, it is also a body that rebuilds itself, that becomes another. The point is not whether this is good or bad, the point is this consumerist way of getting this body", reflects Nísia. "I want to be like this, and I can be like this," summarizes Fabíola.

She adds that the increase in plastic surgery goes through two points that are present in the cultural thinking of a capitalist society: hedonism – wanting to have the perfect body – and nowism – wanting to have it now. "The physical body is becoming something changeable and disposable, in the sense that I can exchange the details," points out Nísia, to which Fabíola complements by citing that "there are a number of layers of transformation, or improvement, in a critical lens."

In the Facebook groups, there is a detail that exemplifies the *productization* of plastic surgeries: the constant advertisements of consortia for plastic surgeries. Companies that call themselves aesthetic services intermediaries make a consortium to perform surgeries. On the website of one of them, it reads the sentence "the body of your dreams starts here". According to the information available, surgeries from 2,000 to 100,000 reais can be financed by the consortium. There are also other loan and financing companies to fund the procedures.

Ads of companies that offer loans and financing to fund the procedures are common in groups about plastic surgery on Facebook (Reproduction)


Se presenteie neste Natal
Sua cirurgia programada é aqui!
Conheça nossos planos com fáceis contemplações

CRÉDITO	PARCELA	PRAZO
R$ 8 MIL	R$ 208,34	48 MESES
R$ 12 MIL	R$ 312,50	48 MESES
R$ 16 MIL	R$ 328,00	60 MESES
R$ 20 MIL	R$ 410,00	60 MESES
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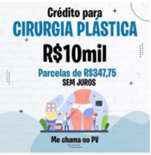

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Installment of R$ 347,75 NO INTEREST
Call me on Private

Crédito para
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Parcelas de R$347,75
SEM JUROS
Me chama no PV

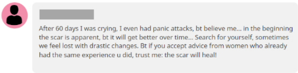
Credit for PLASTIC SURGERY R$ 10,000
Installment of R$ 347,75 NO INTEREST
Call me on Private

Another issue is forgetting about the recovery period. Teacher Carla Fonseca, 41, had the dream of operating on her breasts. A mother of four, she says she always took care of herself and her beauty and, even if she exercised regularly, she didn't fell satisfied with some details of her body. "My dream was silicone, but when I went to the doctor, he proposed abdominoplasty."

The indication occurred because, when performing the preparatory exams, the pedagogue was diagnosed with abdominal diastasis, a deformation of the abdomen that occurs due to the separation of muscles and is common in women over 35 years of age, especially after childbirth. She also discovered having umbilical hernia, a dislocation of abdominal tissue located behind the navel.

As the doctor was a friend of the family, Carla says that it was possible to reach a good financial agreement for her to undergo abdominoplasty, liposculpture in the back, in addition to implanting breast prosthesis.

Soon after the surgery, she confessed in one of the Facebook groups about the result, she was not happy with the scar. Shortly thereafter, she changed her mind and liked the results. "I had no problems in recovery, only a keloid in the belly button and a hypertrophic scar on the belly," she says. The forgetfulness of pain and post-surgical problems and the return to the desire for a new surgery are common processes. "It is the consumption and reconsumption of the same product," points out Nísia.



[redacted]

After 60 days I was crying, I even had panic attacks, bt believe me... in the beginning the scar is apparent, bt it will get better over time... Search for yourself, sometimes we feel lost with drastic changes. Bt if you accept advice from women who already had the same experience u did, trust me: the scar will heal!

In a Facebook group on plastic surgery, participants talk about the post-operative period (Reproduction)

In a capitalist society focused on consumption, "full self-realization is the ability to consume," Fabíola points out. "They are consumer fads," reflects Nísia. By shaping the body in the desired way – and at the desired time – the body also becomes 'a kind of a product' to be advertised. As Nísia explains a constructed character is presented in social media. "The enhancement of oneself needs to be publicized and romanticized. This character of improvement and investment are important aspects to understand this scenario," reflects Fabíola.

The anthropologist explains that it is part of the process showing that one has undergone surgery, and has consumer power, can pay for surgery, for the entire package of consuming goods. "It is part of the consumption process to be able to advertise that the procedure was done – it is an investment and that there is a result to be achieved," she concludes.

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Translated into English by ***Alex Porto Teixeira***, undergraduate student enrolled in the course "Supervised Translation Training I (English)" of the Undergraduate Program in Language and Literature, under the supervision and translation revision of Professor Elizamari R. Becker (P.h.D.) – IL/UFRGS.

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:: Read in portuguese:
Número de cirurgias plásticas cresce a cada ano e suscita debates sobre a autoimagem na sociedade de consumo

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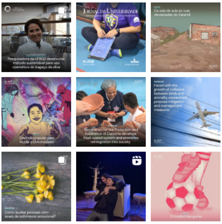

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