Online Reviews and Social Media in Surgeon Selection: A Cross-Sectional Survey of Academic Facial Plastic Surgery Patients

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Background

- Online reviews may influence how patients choose healthcare providers, particularly in facial plastic surgery, where many procedures are elective and preference-driven.[1]
- Up to 95% of aesthetic patients report researching the internet before consultation,[2,3] yet platform preferences, review behaviors, and the role of social media in academic practice remain poorly characterized.
- Prior work shows physician review sites are widely used, but trends and content are poorly defined, and most studies examine ratings broadly or focus on other aesthetic specialties.[4]
- No prior study has surveyed academic facial plastic surgery patients on review behavior, compared review sites against social media, or examined the overlap between review-readers and review-writers.
- Objective: to characterize how online reviews and social media influence surgeon selection among patients at an academic facial plastic surgery practice.

Methods

- Cross-sectional REDCap electronic survey of adults who consulted facial plastic surgeons at a single academic center for cosmetic or reconstructive indications between 2013 and 2023.
- Recruited via institutional data pull; email invitations distributed May–July 2025. Voluntary, de-identified participation with informed consent; sole exclusion was age < 18.
- Survey spanned five domains: demographics, online review use, procedures, platform engagement, and social media influence on surgeon selection.
- Categorical outcomes summarized with available-case denominators. Exploratory age (>60 vs. ≤60) and procedure-type (cosmetic vs. reconstructive) subgroups compared by Fisher's exact test.
- Non-response bias assessed against the contactable registry.

Figure 1. Procedure Type

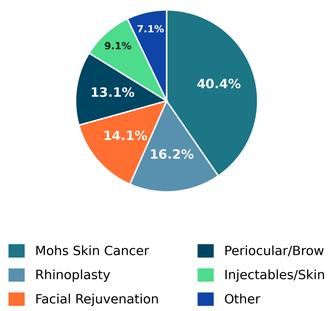

Table 1. Demographics

Characteristic	n (%)
Age > 60 years	88 (73.9%)
Female	64 (53.8%)
Referred by physician	93 (78.2%)
Surgical consultation	108 (90.8%)

N = 119.

Table 2. Review & Social Media Engagement

Item	n (%)
Reviews influenced surgeon selection	19 (16.0%)
Social media influenced surgeon selection	3 (2.5%)
Wrote a review after procedure	20 (21.1%)
Platform use among reviewers	
Institutional website — consulted	18 (94.7%)
Google — consulted	16 (84.2%)
Institutional website — posted to	13 (65.0%)
Google — posted to	7 (35.0%)
Third-party sites — posted to	0 (0.0%)

Table 3. Digital Engagement by Age Group

% reporting	Age > 60	Age ≤ 60	p
Reviews influenced selection	9.1	35.5	**0.001***
Wrote a review	17.8	31.8	0.23
Social media influenced selection	1.1	6.5	0.17

*Values are % within each age group; review-writing among procedure patients. Fisher's exact test; *p < 0.05.*

Results

- Of 2,145 contactable patients, 119 responded (5.5%); 73.9% aged > 60, 53.8% female; 83.2% had undergone a procedure.
- Online reviews influenced surgeon selection for 16.0% of respondents; social media for 2.5%.
- Among those influenced by reviews, the institutional website (94.7%) and Google (84.2%) were most consulted.
- Of procedure patients, 21.1% wrote a review on the institutional website (65.0%) and Google (35.0%); no third-party platform received written reviews.
- Review-reading and review-writing were largely distinct: only 4 of 20 review-writers said reviews influenced their own selection.
- Patients ≤ 60 were far more likely than those > 60 to report review influence (35.5% vs. 9.1%; OR 5.40, 95% CI 1.72–17.77; p = 0.001).
- Respondents were older and more often male than the overall contactable population (73.9% vs. 44.0% aged > 60, p < 0.0001; 45.4% vs. 33.1% male, p = 0.009), indicating potential non-response bias.

Conclusions

- In this academic cohort, online reputation shaped surgeon selection for a minority, and that influence was concentrated largely on institution-affiliated platforms rather than third-party review sites or social media.
- The near-absence of overlap between patients who read reviews and those who write them implies that review volume accrues independently of the patients it is meant to inform, so a representative online presence is unlikely to develop without active solicitation.
- The concentration of review influence among younger patients suggests digital reputation will play a growing role in surgeon selection as the patient population shifts younger.

References

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