

Social Media Guidelines for Young Plastic Surgeons and Plastic Surgery Training Programs

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Summary: Social media are a powerful tool that creates a unique opportunity for the young plastic surgeon and trainee to share content, brand oneself, educate the public, and develop one's own professional voice early. The majority of all plastic surgery programs and particularly those that are highly ranked have social media opportunities for their residents, yet clear rules to guide implementation of social media programming in residency have remained unspecified. These guidelines and pitfalls can be used to inform a productive and professional entry into plastic surgery social media use for the resident and young plastic surgeon. Details regarding specific platform use to maximize exposure are provided. The core principles of patient safety and privacy, authentic photography, plastic surgery education and advocacy, and professionalism inform these guidelines. Pitfalls include establishment of an online physician-patient relationship, engaging in debate by means of online reviews, providing medical entertainment, and engaging in non-plastic surgery politics. Use of these guidelines will allow the young plastic surgeon and trainee to succeed by means of social media platforms in an ethical and professional manner. (*Plast. Reconstr. Surg.* 148: 459, 2021.)

Social media used for the good of plastic surgery, medicine, and society can have a widespread, positive impact—they can connect individuals and facilitate networking, educate and share knowledge, provide information about the latest research, and provide a platform for healthy debate. The social media landscape in plastic surgery is rapidly evolving, including the training environment. Fifty-seven percent of plastic surgery programs now have Instagram accounts, 31 percent have Facebook accounts, and 28 percent have Twitter accounts. Although only a few residency programs have embraced the full power of social media, the social media accounts with the most followers are linked to the nation's top hospitals and most highly ranked training programs.¹ Social media are pervasive and increasingly powerful, and they are not only here to stay but also have developed a commanding role in health care today.

Social media present an opportunity to share accurate, peer-reviewed information with the public in a time when patients increasingly turn to search engines for their health care knowledge, for better or for worse.^{2,3} A survey of the American public revealed that social media sources were

more important in choosing a plastic surgeon over a practice website. In this same group, 96 percent were unclear about the value of board certification.⁴ Patients no longer choose their plastic surgeons based on where they trained, what they trained in, and how long they trained. Dorfman et al. demonstrated that the number of social media followers was statistically significant in attaining a front-page Google ranking, whereas medical school ranking and experience did not contribute.⁵ These facts shed light on the world in which we live, and plastic surgeons are not leading the online conversation about our own field.

In the article by Branford et al., “#PlasticSurgery,” only 6.0 percent of the tweets about plastic surgery were by plastic surgeons. The balance of tweets originated from the public and individuals promoting aesthetic surgical services who were either non-plastic-surgery-trained physicians or—most disturbingly—those who were not even physicians at all. Only 5.4 percent of the tweets about plastic surgery contained the

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hashtag #plasticsurgery.⁶ Although these statistics have not been updated since 2016, other studies have corroborated these findings on other platforms—the majority of content produced is not by plastic surgeons and is mainly self-promotional. Board-certified plastic surgeons are significantly more likely to post educational content.⁷

Given this void, board-certified plastic surgeons ought to consider contributing to this space, to overwhelm the sea of misinformation with authentic plastic surgery knowledge (Table 1). One must also acknowledge that these platforms can and have been used—even by plastic surgeons—in an unprofessional manner. Training the young plastic surgeon in the ethical and professional use of social media should therefore be a component of residency education to avoid these lapses and promote a better understanding of the field for our patients, both current and future.

Further compounding the difficulty of engaging in ethical and professional use of social media for the plastic surgery resident is the lack of clear guidelines by governing bodies such as the American Society of Plastic Surgeons and the American Board of Plastic Surgery. Schoenbrunner et al. demonstrated that the American Society of Plastic Surgeons provides appropriate guidance for professional social media use as an extension of their Code of Ethics.⁸ However, principles are open to interpretation. We propose a set of clear guidelines to lead plastic surgery residents through their training program conscientiously while encouraging them to engage effectively and appropriately with social media.

GUIDE TO SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS

Facebook

Facebook is the original social media platform and boasts the largest number of users. It leans toward an audience older than 35 years. It is also the parent company to the younger-focused Instagram platform. Facebook is geared toward sharing of text, images, video, and links on

Table 1. Ten Commandments of Social Media

Be consistent
Be kind
Be positive
Be professional and do not self-aggrandize
Create innovative content
Educate your audience
Engage with your followers
Interact with influencers
Use hashtags effectively
Use video preferentially over photographs

the Internet, and it encourages communication among its community. Using its analytics, one can promote content to users in a particular region with particular interests. Facebook groups are another powerful marketing tool—most communities have neighborhood groups that share popular doctors and surgeons. Contributing to these groups and answering their questions to inform them can increase one’s social media presence (Table 2).

Instagram

Instagram was an instant hit in plastic surgery because the platform is visually driven, which highlights our work well. The platform is especially popular with millennials, who are significant consumers of plastic surgery. The Instagram algorithm is constantly changing, but consistent posting of material is important. Creative, eye-catching content is key. Instagram stories tend to perform better than individual posts because they appear to all of an account’s followers, as opposed to Instagram posts, which now appear to only approximately 10 percent of followers—this limitation is also true of the parent company Facebook’s algorithm. To boost views beyond 10 percent, the platform requires the user to pay to promote each post. Better than Instagram stories is going “live” on Instagram, which will notify all of an account’s followers in real time and jump to the front of Instagram stories. Consider going “live” with another influencer or colleague to share content with both sets of followers. To promote organic growth, use select (five to 10) relevant hashtags to encourage discovery of one’s content and collaborate with other influencers to share followers. As with all social media platforms, engagement with followers is key—respond to

Table 2. Primary Strengths of Social Media Platforms

Social Media Platform	Primary Strength
Facebook	Largest number of users and broadest exposure; >35-yr-old audience
Instagram	Visual platform/interactive; ideal for plastic surgery content
LinkedIn	Platform geared toward a professional, serious audience
Pinterest	Highly visual platform geared toward millennial and Generation X women; feeds Web traffic directly to the practice website
TikTok	Newest platform; greatest opportunity to become influential early; young audience; ability to go viral with few followers
Twitter	Best platform for academic discussion and networking
YouTube	Best platform for long-form video sharing

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their questions, answer their messages, and build a community with them. Instagram is very aggressive with censorship of nudity, even for breast cancer cases. Be sure to censor body parts, including nipples, genitals, and the perineal region in general to avoid being banned.

YouTube

YouTube is the reigning long-form video platform on social media. Videos can be up to 15 minutes long for the average user; verified users can post videos up to 12 hours long or 128 GB. That said, attention spans continue to decrease, so keep videos short and concise. Basic video editing software is helpful. Carefully select the video thumbnail, as this image is what catches the viewer’s eye while scrolling through search results. This platform is the place to house content that is meant to persist and be viewed over months and years. Examples of content include detailed intra-operative videos, a weekly or monthly video log, and an introduction to a practice. Be sure to have clear branding throughout your videos—they should appear aesthetically cohesive. At the end of a video, consider asking the viewer to subscribe to the YouTube channel, and consider including a link to a previously posted video to encourage the viewer to continue exploring the channel.

Twitter

Twitter remains a hub for academic exchanges on social media, particularly sharing peer-reviewed literature, engaging with other professionals, and exchanging information. Posts are limited to 140 characters; however, Twitter does allow posting of images and video as long as 140 seconds. As with Instagram, judicious use of hashtags and tagging of relevant profiles can boost exposure to followers. Use of trending hashtags, which can be monitored, and engaging in tweets on those topics can also raise visibility. Twitter focuses on communication and community, so interacting with followers and acknowledging others is key to promoting organic growth.

LinkedIn

LinkedIn is a networking platform geared toward a professional audience that is more mature and serious. Users use the site to remain connected to colleagues, share their work, search for jobs, and plan professional advancement. It has evolved to include a streaming feed similar to Facebook where articles, images, and opinion pieces can be shared with your followers. This platform can be used to

network with plastic surgeons, promote the latest research and techniques, and gain a social media following from a professional crowd. Consider endorsing colleagues for skills they possess and seeking recommendations from colleagues.

TikTok

TikTok is the newest—and youngest—social media platform, and accordingly its audience skews very young. As with the launch of all new platforms, the audience may start young, but it continues to expand as millennials and the parents of the youngest users have joined. TikTok is a musically based video platform. Content involves 15-second clips, which can be merged to create a maximum of 60 seconds of video at a time. The advantage of TikTok is that the creative content has the potential to go viral even without any followers—its algorithm will promote any content that is viewed favorably by other users. This platform offers the greatest opportunity for rapid growth on the social media stage, as it is still in its nascent phase.

Pinterest

Pinterest is a visually based social media platform that allows users to create a vision board of images “pinned” from other websites on their own page. The pinned images link directly back to the original website; thus, this platform can provide direct traffic back to your website. This platform is popular with millennial and Generation X women.

ADVANCED PLATFORM DETAILS

Verification

On becoming a successful plastic surgeon influencer, copycat accounts may be created that mimic original accounts. To avoid the propagation of misinformation, an individual or business can apply for verified status on most platforms to ensure that followers know they are indeed following an original account. Verification criteria are somewhat mystifying, as they are determined by each social media entity in a different (and unlisted) manner. As a general rule, one must have an influential or large following, be a public figure, or have multiple sources of high-quality press, but it is quite variable.

Business Accounts

The social media platforms that offer business accounts provide a valuable tool. Business accounts provide data analytics to the user, which can reveal

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what content resonated with followers and at what times of the day and week they are likely to view one's content. This information helps manage growth, engage the target audience, and provide feedback in real time. Business accounts will also help measure whether the plastic surgeon's social media use is achieving the desired effect—be that an increase in engagement, driving patients to the practice website, or gaining new followers, among others.

Professional Website

The professional website remains a key business tool and acts as the central location to send all Web traffic generated on social media sites. It is a “landing zone” for Google searches and provides contact information, which will have a cumulative positive effect on search engine optimization for the website. Although residents cannot have a practice website in advance of graduation, they can have personal blogs, which can later evolve to a practice website. After graduation, the website should contain—at a minimum—a gallery of before-and-after photographs highlighting the surgeon's work and multiple points of contact for the practice (e-mail, telephone, address).

Search Engine Optimization

Search engine optimization describes the process of increasing the visibility of one's content as it appears in the search engine results page. This process takes time, and search results rankings will improve with the publication of outstanding and unique content, which is interesting to the viewer. As always, write or speak to the audience rather than the Google algorithm, and publish frequent and original content to organically build a Web presence. Link all content back to the home page—back-links are critical to improving search engine optimization and also increase Web traffic back to the professional website “landing zone.”

CORE PRINCIPLES

Patient Privacy and Safety

Of the utmost importance are respecting the patient's privacy, providing the highest quality care, and ensuring that the patient's wishes are respected (Table 3). Although education is important—and although patients may even wish for their photographs and information to be shared on social media—it must never interfere with the care of the patient. Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act compliance

Table 3. Social Media Pearls and Pitfalls

Pearls
Advocate for plastic surgery–related causes
Focus on education
Maintain a high level of professionalism
Maintain high-quality photographic standards
Maintain patient privacy
Pitfalls
Accidentally establishing a patient-physician relationship online
Engaging in online political debate
Engaging in debate over online reviews
Engaging in paid sponsorships and partnerships
Garnering attention for unprofessional behavior; purchasing followers or “bot” accounts

must be maintained at all times during electronic communication.⁹ If the patient does wish to have his or her personal information shared for educational purposes, the patient's exact preferences must be followed. Patients should be given the option to have nothing shared or deidentified or fully identifiable information shared. They are able to determine which platforms on which they agree to share their information. It must be clear that the patient's care will not be altered by these choices and that the patient may refuse all media involvement.¹⁰ The patient must be informed that once images or information are posted online, the plastic surgeon and the patient no longer have control over the data—they then belong to the platform itself and can never be truly removed. Although posts can be deleted per patient preference at any time, the data put on the Internet are truly “forever” in this sense. The surgeon also cannot control how others may use the images on the Internet.

With regard to patient safety, one criticism of social media is the potential to prolong anesthetic times while taking photographs or creating video content. Although one might argue that in creating content for educational resources the same prolongation of operative time might occur, the better solution is to have a staff photographer or videographer acquire the footage and photographs so as to cause no delays. The plastic surgeon and plastic surgery resident ought to be entirely focused on the patient's care for the duration of the operation.

Education

Plastic surgery trainees should focus on providing education to the public, as they are already more qualified than the 94 percent non-plastic surgeon majority of those discussing plastic surgery on the Internet (Table 4). It is an opportunity to share what one is reading, hot topics in

Table 4. Goals of Social Media Education for Young Plastic Surgeons and Residents

Build an organic Web presence for search engine optimization using original content
Establish the importance of a website as a landing page for Internet traffic
Identify which platform is best for which content
Follow the ASPS Code of Ethics*
Understand how to harness social media to promote the plastic surgeon's online goals (e.g., education, leadership, advocacy)
Understand the importance of online reviews

ASPS, American Society of Plastic Surgeons.

*From the ASPS Ethics Committee 2017. Code of Ethics of the American Society of Plastic Surgeons. Available at: <https://www.plasticsurgery.org/documents/governance/asps-code-of-ethics.pdf>. Accessed December 9, 2020.

plastic surgery, an area of interest, or the focus of a current rotation. Video content can be of particular interest here. Residents can give lessons in anatomy, teach a new or old technique, provide a miniature lecture on a plastic surgery topic, or share the findings from a recent journal club. Discussing an open-access journal article has the additional benefit that the viewer can also download it to study. All of these topics are safe, professional, and ethical. Use appropriate and professional hashtags (#plasticsurgery) to help your content be found.

Advocacy

Social media provide a platform to promote plastic surgery-specific causes as long as it is done so tastefully and respectfully. These causes can include promoting the availability of breast reconstruction for all breast cancer patients, insurance coverage for all children with congenital deformity, advocacy for burn victims, or even the political front as related to patient care and health policy creation. Social media allow the opportunity to network and interact with like-minded individuals to create positive change.

Photography

Although it is true that patients on the Internet widely seek out before-and-after photographs, residents ought to be particularly cautious about sharing patient photographs on social media.¹¹ Residents cannot present the work of their attending physicians as their own on social media. If residents are performing chief-level cases, the patients must sign a social media release consent not only for the institution but also for the resident surgeon himself or herself. The resident must also have the permission of the supervising attending physician. Depending on each institution's social

media policy, it is possible that no patient photographs may be shared at all.

If posting patient photographs is allowed, be sure to avoid photograph manipulation—be it through Photoshop, filters, or apps such as Facetune. It is a clear violation of American Society of Plastic Surgeons Code of Ethics to falsely advertise results that can lead to unrealistic expectations of patients.¹² It is preferential to show long-term results; however, this is a challenge in residency training, given the brevity of rotations and lack of long-term individual follow-up. The length of time between before-and-after photographs should be listed.

To deidentify patient photographs, extreme close-up views of the patient may be used—the lips, nose, or an eye only may be used, for example. Birth defects, tattoos, body piercings, and other corporal modifications must be blurred out or otherwise censored. The same poses and angles should be used to standardize the images. Finally, the data files themselves must be examined to ensure no metadata that can identify the patient is present, such as the name of the patient in the file name or geotagging of the image to identify the location where the photograph was taken.

Professionalism

When reviewing candidate social media content and materials before posting them, ensure that they are positive, concise, and original. If one is reposting or rephrasing another's work, be sure to reference the original material. Limit posts that can be viewed as self-aggrandizing, and avoid hard-selling the audience. Engage frequently with your peers and audience to promote your content, and post with kindness.¹³ If in doubt, refer to the American Society of Plastic Surgeons Code of Ethics to maintain one's standards and ensure the highest levels of professionalism are being met.¹⁴ Maintain separate professional and personal social media accounts. Avoid the inclusion of non-professional content such as alcoholic beverages or profane language.

Goals and Audience Cultivation

Determining the desired audience on social media and the goals of creating content will help guide the young plastic surgeon's choices. If the goal is to build a new aesthetic practice and attract patients, posting content such as before-and-after photographs of favorite operations may be helpful. Similarly, engaging with the breast reconstruction patient community, which is very active on social media and has its own private Facebook

groups, can help build that aspect of a practice. Determining what content drives followers to call the office or look up the practice address and convert them to a real patient is valuable. This target audience is likely to consist of lay people rather than other plastic surgeons. Posting cadaver dissections or niche academic articles may not resonate with this audience and may even be repellent.

Alternatively, the plastic surgery resident interested in a hand fellowship may be more interested in expanding professional networking and demonstrating academic potential. This resident may find more value in sharing recently published articles, engaging in discussion surrounding surgical techniques and research, and connecting with other trainees and professors of plastic surgery. For this scenario, the desired audience is other plastic surgeons, and analyzing post engagement is helpful to determine whether the content resonates with this audience. The goals and desired audience can evolve with time as the resident completes training and shifts focus.

PITFALLS

Internet Establishment of the Patient-Physician Relationship

The patient-physician relationship begins as soon as medical advice is exchanged, specific to that patient. This interaction can be problematic, given that trainees (as all physicians) must adhere to legal regulations regarding interstate medical licensing, scope of practice, and electronic communication.⁹ Trainees must avoid establishing this relationship over the Internet, and medical advice ought not to be provided. Patients should instead be redirected back to their physician. It may also be important to state that one cannot provide medical advice by means of social media platforms—only general, impersonal information can be provided.

Politics

Avoid controversial topics that fall outside the scope of plastic surgery such as politics, religion, illicit substances, and others. These topics are polarizing and generally do not have a role in professional social media, unless one is supporting patient advocacy efforts such as through PlastyPAC, the political arm of the American Society of Plastic Surgeons.

Medical Entertainment

Avoid crossing or blurring ethical or professional lines by providing entertainment to your

viewership at the expense of patients or your own professional image.¹² Such unacceptable behaviors include dancing in the operating room, making medical jokes in poor taste for shock value, or demonstrating a lack of compassion. These behaviors are notably distinct from engaging in tasteful humor to connect with the social media audience, which can be a highly effective tool. The core ethical principles of autonomy, beneficence, nonmaleficence, and justice must be upheld at all times.

Reviews

Although residents are not actively out in practice, as soon as residents are assigned a National Provider Identifier number in their intern year, ratings websites will automatically create profiles for them. Physicians are not allowed to write evaluations about themselves on these review sites, nor can they solicit friends and family to review them. Only actual patients of the physician ought to be encouraged to provide reviews should they desire.⁹ Should negative reviews appear, do not respond to them. The only defense in this scenario is a good offense—encourage happy patients to write positive reviews, diluting the negative ones.

Sponsorships and Partnerships

Paid sponsorship and advertisements or procedural and surgical discounting blur ethical lines at baseline. The ethics of this topic are not yet clearly delineated; thus, it is best to avoid these situations as a plastic surgery trainee.¹⁵ The Federal Trade Commission clearly delineates that any promotion that is paid must be identified as an advertisement or equivalent to protect the public interest. Plastic surgeons must also abide by these rules on social media platforms and maintain the American Society of Plastic Surgeons Code of Ethics standards, which prohibit false or misleading advertising.

CONCLUSIONS

Social media are a powerful tool that creates a unique opportunity for the young plastic surgeon and trainee to share content, brand oneself, educate the public, and develop one's own professional voice early. The majority of all plastic surgery programs, and particularly those that are highly ranked, have social media opportunities for their residents, yet clear rules to guide implementation of social media programming in residency have remained unspecified. These guidelines and pitfalls can be used to guide a productive and professional entry into plastic surgery social media use.

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