

Addressing Ethics in Plastic and Aesthetic Surgery: Società Italiana di Chirurgia Plastica Ricostruttiva ed Estetica's Social Media Policy

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Background: The pervasive influence of social media on plastic surgery necessitates a robust ethical framework to guide professional conduct online. The Società Italiana di Chirurgia Plastica Ricostruttiva ed Estetica (SICPRE) recognized the need for an ethical code that addresses the unique challenges posed by social media in the field of plastic surgery.

Methods: A dedicated group, referred to as the Social Media Chat, was formed within SICPRE in November 2022. The group comprised members with varying levels of expertise, including the SICPRE president, plastic surgeons, professors, and residents. Through a comprehensive review of existing ethical codes and social media policies from 26 national and international plastic surgery societies, the group identified key ethical considerations. Virtual meetings facilitated discussions and the creation of content for SICPRE's official social channels.

Results: The analysis revealed that only a few societies had formal social media policies, whereas many had generic ethical codes with minimal guidance on social media use. SICPRE's ethical code, formulated through collaborative efforts and multiple revisions, includes 10 fundamental points addressing professionalism, transparency, patient privacy, and ethical marketing. The code was integrated into SICPRE's broader ethical guidelines to ensure consistency and comprehensiveness.

Conclusions: SICPRE's ethical code offers a detailed framework for navigating the intersection of plastic surgery and social media, emphasizing honesty, transparency, and respect for patient dignity. By aligning with best practices and addressing gaps in existing policies, this initiative aimed to enhance professional standards and patient trust in the digital age. Future updates will ensure the policy remains relevant amid evolving digital communication landscapes. (*Plast Reconstr Surg Glob Open* 2025; 13:e6493; doi: [10.1097/GOX.00000000000006493](https://doi.org/10.1097/GOX.00000000000006493); Published online 7 February 2025.)

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the pervasive influence of social media on personal and societal perceptions of beauty has significantly intersected with the field of plastic surgery.¹⁻⁴ Platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok have not only become conduits for sharing beauty trends

but also arenas where aesthetic ideals are formed, challenged, and propagated at an unprecedented scale.⁵ This digital revolution has catalyzed a transformation in how individuals perceive their bodies, subsequently influencing their decisions to undergo cosmetic enhancements. The implications of this transformation are profound,

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touching on aspects of psychology, ethics, and medicine, and prompting a need for a critical examination of the relationship between social media and plastic surgery.^{3,6} The democratization of beauty standards through social media platforms has facilitated a more inclusive representation of beauty. However, it has concurrently led to the commodification of cosmetic surgery, wherein surgical interventions are increasingly marketed and consumed as products rather than medical services. The proliferation of “before and after” photographs, endorsements by influencers,³ and narratives of personal transformation can serve to normalize and trivialize surgical procedures. This normalization, in turn, may obscure the inherent risks associated with surgery and foster unrealistic expectations among prospective patients.⁶

One of the most concerning aspects of this trend is its potential to exacerbate psychological vulnerabilities. The constant exposure to idealized images can contribute to dissatisfaction with one’s appearance and may lead to conditions such as body dysmorphic disorder, characterized by an obsessive focus on perceived flaws in appearance. The desire to achieve the unattainable standards often depicted on social media can drive individuals toward plastic surgery as a perceived solution, without adequate consideration of the potential psychological and physical consequences.⁷

Recognizing the profound impact of social media on the field, the Società Italiana di Chirurgia Plastica Ricostruttiva ed Estetica (SICPRE) has proactively addressed these challenges by formulating an ethical code.^{8,9} This pioneering initiative aimed to guide plastic surgeons in their use of social media, ensuring that their online conduct promotes transparency, honesty, and respect for the dignity and autonomy of patients.^{10,11} The ethical code is a testament to the profession’s commitment to ethical standards, advocating for a practice that prioritizes patient safety, informed decision-making, and realistic portrayals of cosmetic surgery outcomes.

This article sought to explore the intricate dynamics between social media and plastic surgery, with a particular focus on the ethical considerations necessitated by this relationship. Central to our discussion is the presentation and analysis of the ethical code developed by SICPRE. We will examine the content of the code, its implications for plastic surgeons’ online behavior, and its potential to mitigate the risks associated with the digital promotion and portrayal of plastic surgery. By doing so, the article aimed to highlight the importance of ethical guidelines in navigating the complex ethical landscape introduced by social media, offering insights into how such codes can contribute to the advancement of ethical practice in plastic surgery.

Through a comprehensive review of the literature, analysis of case studies, and examination of the ethical codes itself, this research endeavors to contribute to the broader discourse on medical ethics in the age of social media. It underscores the necessity of ethical guidelines that not only respond to the current digital challenges but also anticipate future developments in the intersection of social media and medical practice. In presenting the

Takeaways

Question: How can an ethical framework be developed to guide plastic surgeons’ professional conduct on social media?

Findings: A dedicated Società Italiana di Chirurgia Plastica Ricostruttiva ed Estetica (SICPRE) group conducted a systematic review of 26 plastic surgery societies’ ethical codes and social media policies, identifying gaps and formulating a new ethical code. This code emphasizes professionalism, transparency, patient privacy, and ethical marketing and was integrated into SICPRE’s broader ethical guidelines.

Meaning: SICPRE’s new ethical code provides a comprehensive framework for plastic surgeons to navigate social media responsibly, enhancing professional standards and patient trust.

SICPRE’s ethical code, this article champions the notion that ethical engagement on social media by plastic surgeons is not merely a professional obligation but a moral imperative to ensure the well-being and dignity of patients in the digital age.^{3,7,12}

MATERIALS AND METHODS

To address the ethical considerations surrounding the intersection of social media and plastic surgery, the SICPRE undertook a collaborative effort. This initiative aimed to formulate an ethical code to guide plastic surgeons in their online conduct, promoting transparency, honesty, and respect for patient dignity and autonomy. A dedicated group, referred to as the Social Media Chat, was formed within SICPRE in November 2022 to specifically address the ethical challenges posed by social media in the context of plastic surgery. The group comprised members with various levels of expertise, including the SICPRE president, plastic surgeons, professors, and residents. Among the spontaneous applications from trainees who showed interest in this initiative, 2 were chosen from each geographical area of Italy. Table 1 shows all the participants.

The commission’s initial task was to create social media content related to plastic surgery for the society’s official media profiles. In November 2023, the social media commission continued its work by pursuing the objective of implementing updates to its ethical code, in response to the evolution of digital communication. The goal was to draft a new social media policy, drawing inspiration from the recent directives outlined in the “Gazzetta Ufficiale della Repubblica Italiana,” published on June 29, 2023, by the president of the republic. This policy sought to adapt

Disclosure statements are at the end of this article, following the correspondence information.

Related Digital Media are available in the full-text version of the article on www.PRSGlobalOpen.com.

Table 1. Social Media Committee

Title	Name	Geographic Location
Main advisor	Fabrizio Schonauer	Naples, Italy
SICPRE president	Stefania de Fazio	Rome, Italy
SICPRE society press office	Dorina Macchi	Rome, Italy
Plastic surgery specialists and resident-members of SICPRE	Anna Chiara Cavaliere	Naples, Italy
	Daniele Matta	Palermo, Italy
	Mirco Pozzi	Siena, Italy
	Anna Scarabosio	Udine, Italy
	Giulio Tarantino	Rome, Italy
	Matilde Tettamanzi	Sassari, Italy
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these principles to the context of plastic surgery and social media engagement for society members.

A comprehensive review of relevant literature was conducted to inspire the development of the ethical code. This included examining existing ethical guidelines and codes of conduct established by other professional societies, as well as pertinent articles and publications.

Plastic Surgery Societies and Social Media Policy

The ethical codes and the codes of conduct of the most recognized plastic surgery professional societies were identified and analyzed in search of an appropriate social media policy. The websites of the national societies available on the European Association of Plastic Surgeons website were consulted.¹⁰ Additionally, a web search was performed with the terms “social media policy in plastic surgery” and “ethical code in plastic surgery” to include more results. Societies from all over the world were considered. No more than 2 representative societies from each country were included to ensure the sample’s representativeness. Including too many societies from the same country would have skewed the results toward the beliefs and ideas prevalent in that country. If exclusions were necessary for this reason, we selected the 2 societies that appeared to have the most comprehensive and focused regulations regarding social media, which is the primary interest of our review. All relevant documents were downloaded from the official websites of the societies. If necessary, downloaded documents were translated from their original language using the Google Translate App (Google LLC).

RESULTS

Virtual meetings were scheduled to facilitate discussions and brainstorming sessions among commission members. Each member was asked to create informative content concerning various aspects of plastic surgery, which was then posted monthly on SICPRE’s official social channels, for example, Facebook, Instagram, and the society’s website. These meetings provided an opportunity to outline the objectives of the social media posts and establish the framework for the ethical code. Recognizing the importance of continued collaboration and communication, the commission held regular virtual meetings

to further refine their ideas. The insights gleaned from these discussions, meetings, and the literature review were integrated into the society’s ethical code, reflecting SICPRE’s commitment to maintaining high standards in the digital age and on social media. Building upon these insights, the commission collaboratively drafted an ethical code consisting of 10 fundamental points, designed to address key ethical considerations pertinent to the promotion and portrayal of plastic surgery on social media platforms.

The web search for social media policies in plastic surgery societies was performed between December 2023 and January 2024. A total of 31 societies were identified: 22 from the European Association of Plastic Surgeons website and 9 from the web search using the terms “social media policy in plastic surgery” and “ethical code in plastic surgery.” Based on the selection criteria, just 26 were definitively included. Websites of societies in Table 2 were searched for social media policy.^{11–37}

Ethical codes, codes of conduct, or, if present, formal social media policies of the abovementioned societies were carefully reviewed. For 9 societies (Austrian, Croatian, Finnish, French, Israeli, Portuguese, Spanish, Swiss, and Dutch), there was no mention of a formal social media policy or ethical codes available on their websites or accessible to nonmembers. The Hungarian and Romanian societies did not have their own ethical codes but referred to the general ethical code that regulates the medical profession. These codes included a few articles regulating advertising in the medical profession. For the Japanese and Swedish societies, although an ethical code was available for consultation on their websites, there was no specific mention of regulations for advertising and marketing; they referred to generic rules for the medical profession.

For 9 societies (Belgian, Brazilian, Canadian, Danish, Greek, Moroccan, American, British, and Australian), the ethical code was easily accessible on their websites. The Brazilian, Canadian, Danish, Greek, Moroccan, and Australian societies had specific paragraphs in their ethical codes concerning advertising, marketing, and mass media communications but with generic instructions and no formal mention of social media communications. The Belgian society’s ethical code prohibits any form of advertising by its members. The American and British societies had more detailed paragraphs regarding advertisement,

Table 2. Societies Included in the Research Process

Societies Included
Österreichische Gesellschaft für Plastische, Ästhetische und Rekonstruktive Chirurgie (Austria) ¹¹
Belgian Society of Plastic, Aesthetic and Reconstructive Surgery (Belgium) ¹³
Brazilian Society of Plastic Surgery (Brazil) ¹⁴
Canadian Society of Plastic Surgeons (Canada) ¹⁵
Croatian Society of Plastic, Reconstructive and Aesthetic Surgery (Croatia) ¹⁶
Danish Society of Plastic and Reconstructive Surgeons (Denmark) ¹⁷
Finnish Society of Plastic Surgeons (Finland) ¹⁸
Société Française de Chirurgie Plastique Reconstructrice et Esthétique (France) ¹⁹
Deutsche Gesellschaft der Plastischen, Rekonstruktiven und Ästhetischen Chirurgen (Germany) ²⁰
Hellenic Society for Plastic, Reconstructive and Aesthetic Surgery (Greece) ²¹
Hungarian Society of Plastic, Reconstructive and Aesthetic (Hungary) ²²
The Israel Society of Plastic Surgeons (Israel) ²³
Japan Society of Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery (Japan) ²⁴
Moroccan Society of Aesthetic and Plastic Surgeons (Morocco) ²⁵
Sociedade Portuguesa de Cirurgia Plástica Reconstructiva e Estética (Portugal) ²⁶
The Romanian Association of Plastic Surgeon (Romania) ²⁷
SECPRE – Sociedad Española de Cirugía Plástica Reparadora y Estética (Spain) ²⁸
Swedish Association of Plastic Surgeons (Sweden) ²⁹
Swiss Society of Plastic Reconstructive and Aesthetic Surgery (Switzerland) ³⁰
Netherlands Society for Plastic Surgery Handsurgery, Aesthetic and Reconstructive Surgery (Netherlands) ³¹
British Association of Plastic, Reconstructive and Aesthetic Surgeons (UK) ³²
American Society of Plastic Surgeons (US) ³³
Florida Society of Plastic Surgeons FSPS (FL) ³⁴

marketing, and communication, but again, no specific subsection for social media.

Only the Australasian, the Federación Ibero Latinoamericana de Cirugía Plástica, and the German societies had formal social media policies. The contents of these documents were carefully reviewed and summarized by the members of the SICPRE Social Media Chat.

The recommendations presented in these social media policies mainly focused on the following key points:

- Authenticity of the message
- Respect for the patient
- Respect for the medical profession

The initial draft of the ethical code underwent multiple rounds of revision and refinement based on feedback from commission members, the president, and the board of directors. Input from different perspectives ensured that the ethical code was comprehensive, balanced, and reflective of the values and principles upheld by the society. Following extensive deliberation and consensus-building, the final version of the ethical code was submitted for review by a lawyer and was finally ratified by the SICPRE leadership.³⁸ It was officially adopted as guiding principles for members

engaging in social media activities related to plastic surgery. Herein, we report the English version of SICPRE's social media policy.

Our social media policy is the code of conduct that regulates SICPRE members' exposure on the internet, particularly on social media. It outlines the main rules of conduct that all SICPRE members are required to adhere to when using social media and personal accounts, and especially with the account assigned to them on the "SICPRE" domain, regarding publishing content or comments or publicly posting any other type of information referring to plastic and/or aesthetic surgery activities.

The improper use of social channels can seriously damage the image and reputation of our members and, consequently, of SICPRE itself, exposing them to requests for financial reparation or other legal, civil, and/or criminal actions. Therefore, a clear and effective social media policy is intended to protect everyone: both SICPRE members and their patients. This policy shall be integrated into the society's code of ethics, reflecting SICPRE's commitment to maintaining high standards, even in the digital age and within the social media domain. All SICPRE members who describe their work activities must clearly specify that any opinions expressed are strictly personal in nature and under no circumstances represent the official position of the SICPRE organization, thereby exonerating it from any direct or indirect liability of its individual members' actions.

SICPRE members who fail to comply with these regulations shall be referred to the Panel of Directors of the Arbitration Board. The Arbitration Board proposes sanctions against the offending SICPRE member based on Article 10 of the Implementing Regulations, including a warning, temporary suspension, or expulsion. The Panel of Directors shall implement the sanction with immediate effect to be ratified during the subsequent SICPRE society assembly.

The objective of the social media policy is to guide members to use social platforms for professional communication, scientific information, and advertising, in compliance with our code of ethics and patient privacy policies. SICPRE's social media policy must be reviewed and updated regularly to align with the evolution of social platforms or the implementation of new laws and regulations. The key points that SICPRE members must adhere to are summarized in [Table 3](#).

DISCUSSION

In the rapidly evolving landscape of plastic surgery, the advent of social media has significantly altered the dynamics of patient expectations, professional representation, and public communication.^{1,4,12} Recognizing these challenges, the SICPRE has formulated an ethical code to navigate the complex interplay between the ethical imperatives of medical practice and the pervasive influence of digital media. This discussion integrates the principles outlined in SICPRE's ethical code with insights from recent scientific literature, offering a nuanced exploration of the

Table 3. The Key Points to Which SICPRE Members Must Adhere

Key Points	
1. Profile and qualifications	Choose and maintain a consistent image based on professionalism. State your degrees, titles, and professional qualifications clearly and truthfully
2. Professional conduct and decorum	Maintain a professional demeanor and a respectful tone in all interactions, even when engaging in controversial topics or discussions. Refrain from making statements that could damage the professional specialty of plastic surgeons, the reputation of SICPRE, or undermine public trust. Do not spread content that is offensive, discriminatory, or inappropriate, or that could be considered unprofessional. Demonstrate respect towards colleagues and comply with any legal and regulatory requirements of the medical association to which you belong
3. Clear and transparent communication	Communication concerning procedures, results, and expectations must be clear and transparent. Avoid the use of filters or manipulative, deceiving language. Images must be handled with care and professionalism and must realistically reflect the results obtained. Ensure that all information published, including healthcare innovations and new surgical techniques, is accurate, verifiable, and accredited by the scientific community, without creating excessive promises or unrealistic expectations
4. Educational content	Prioritize sharing informative and educational content related to plastic and/or cosmetic surgery. If you present, describe, or discuss methods, techniques, and innovations, avoid describing surgical techniques already published in scientific literature as your own
5. Patient privacy	Strictly avoid sharing and disclosing patient-identifying information without explicit written consent
6. Advertising and self-promotion	Follow ethical standards and refrain from any "spectacularizing" in advertising practices. Avoid exaggerated or fraudulent promises, or content that induces misguided trust, in compliance with local laws and regulations regarding healthcare advertising. Promote the need for in-depth consultations and personalized assessments, emphasizing that general information provided on social media cannot replace professional medical advice
7. Prices and discounts	It is inappropriate to communicate prices or any discounts in reference to therapeutic medical or surgical services
8. Testimonials and reviews	Handle patient testimonials and reviews truthfully, avoiding manipulative language, images, or misleading omissions
9. Conflicts of interest	Declare any conflicts of interest on social platforms. Clearly identify your relationship with reviewers or influencers connected to you personally or professionally. Disclose any compensation received from any sponsorship
10. Responsible communication on WhatsApp and Instant messaging platforms	The use of WhatsApp and other instant messaging services for communication with patients must comply with current privacy regulations. Adopt maximum caution when managing sensitive content: such content must remain within the personal doctor-patient chat. It is advisable to keep copies of conversations with patients, as they can be legally valuable in potential litigation. Instant messaging is a valid communication tool between doctor and patient; nevertheless, it is important to remember that it cannot substitute for an in-person visit or consultation This social media policy reflects SICPRE's commitment to maintaining professionalism and ethical standards in all online interactions related to plastic surgery

ethical considerations at the intersection of plastic surgery and social media.

Our web search revealed significant variability in the comprehensiveness and specificity of social media policies among plastic surgery societies. For instance, the American Society of Plastic Surgeons has detailed guidelines that address patient confidentiality, advertising standards, and professional conduct on social media. Their policies emphasize the importance of transparency and honesty in all online interactions, and they provide specific recommendations for managing patient consent and avoiding misleading advertising.³³

On the other hand, some societies, such as the Australian Society of Plastic Surgeons, do not have formalized social media policies. Although they recognize the importance of ethical conduct online, they have yet to develop specific guidelines that address the unique challenges posed by social media platforms.³⁶ These findings highlight the need for standardized, comprehensive social media policies across the field to ensure ethical and professional conduct. By establishing clear and detailed guidelines, societies can help their members navigate the complexities of social media use, promote patient safety, and maintain public trust in the profession.

The influence of social media on patient perceptions and expectations of plastic surgery is profound.^{3,7,12,39}

Platforms filled with highly curated images have led to an escalation in patient demands for aesthetic procedures, often fueled by unrealistic expectations of surgical outcomes. The ethical code's strict stance against misleading communication directly addresses this issue, advocating for honesty and transparency in all public engagements. This aligns with emerging research, which underscores the importance of managing patient expectations as a critical component of patient satisfaction and psychological well-being. Clear, realistic communication about the potential outcomes and risks of procedures can significantly mitigate postsurgical disappointment and distress.^{1,12,40–43}

In the realm of marketing and public relations, the ethical challenges are particularly pronounced. The digital age offers unprecedented opportunities for the promotion of medical services; however, it also raises ethical concerns about the integrity of such promotions. SICPRE's ethical code, by prohibiting false, fraudulent, or misleading forms of communication, echoes the broader medical literature's call for ethical marketing practices. This literature emphasizes that deceptive marketing not only jeopardizes patient safety but also undermines trust in and the credibility of the medical profession at large. Ethical marketing, therefore, emerges not just as a legal obligation but as a moral imperative to uphold the principles of beneficence and nonmaleficence.

Furthermore, the ethical code's provisions for the accurate representation of a surgeon's qualifications and outcomes touch on the core values of professional integrity and public trust. The relationship between ethical conduct and patient trust is well documented, with studies indicating that transparency and honesty are key drivers of patient confidence and trust in healthcare providers. In this context, SICPRE's guidelines serve as a critical framework for maintaining the integrity of the plastic surgery profession, ensuring that surgeons' online and media representations accurately reflect their skills and the realistic outcomes of their interventions.^{4,40–42}

The cautious approach to promoting unverified innovations, as stipulated by the ethical code, reflects a wider debate on the balance between innovation and evidence-based practice. The rapid pace of technological advancement in plastic surgery, coupled with the allure of novel procedures promoted via social media, presents a significant ethical challenge. The literature advocates for a cautious, evidence-based approach to innovation, emphasizing the importance of scientific validation before new techniques are widely adopted. SICPRE's ethical code, by discouraging the dissemination of unverified claims, reinforces the principle that patient safety and the scientific integrity of the field must always take precedence over the pursuit of novelty.

Moreover, the ethical implications of digital imaging and social media use are multifaceted. The manipulation of images and the selective presentation of outcomes can distort public perceptions of plastic surgery, creating false or exaggerated expectations. The scientific community has increasingly recognized the need for ethical guidelines that govern the use of before-and-after photographs and digital enhancements, advocating for representations that accurately depict typical, rather than exceptional, results. SICPRE's code contributes to this discourse, emphasizing the ethical responsibility of surgeons to present their work in a manner that is both truthful and respectful of the potential impact on patient expectations.

Finally, the ethical code's emphasis on professional conduct, collaboration, and the representation of society in media interactions underscores the collective responsibility of plastic surgeons to uphold the field's ethical standards. The literature on professional conduct in medicine highlights the importance of fostering a collaborative, respectful environment that prioritizes patient welfare above competitive or commercial interests. By advocating for a unified approach to media engagements and professional representation, SICPRE's ethical code reinforces the societal expectation that medical professionals should act not only as individual practitioners but also as custodians of their field's ethical and scientific integrity.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

To ensure the continued relevance and effectiveness of SICPRE's social media policy, it is crucial to establish a feedback loop that includes regular updates and

reviews. As social media platforms and their use are constantly changing and evolving, a timeline cannot be clearly defined as to when a social media policy should be updated. Future research could focus on assessing the impact of the ethical code on patient outcomes and professional standards. Additionally, exploring the real-world implications through case studies or hypothetical scenarios can provide valuable insights into the practical application of these guidelines. (See **appendix, Supplemental Digital Content 1**, which displays the SICPRE ethical code, <http://links.lww.com/PRSGO/D815>.)

In conclusion, the formulation of SICPRE's social media policy represents a significant step toward addressing the ethical challenges posed by the digital age. By integrating best practices and aligning with broader medical literature, SICPRE ensures that its members uphold the highest standards of professionalism, integrity, and patient care in their social media engagements.

CONCLUSIONS

The intersection of plastic surgery and social media presents a complex array of ethical challenges, from managing patient expectations to ensuring the integrity of marketing practices and the accuracy of public information. SICPRE's ethical code offers a comprehensive framework for addressing these issues, grounded in the principles of honesty, transparency, and patient welfare. As the field continues to evolve in the digital age, the adherence to such ethical guidelines will be paramount in navigating the ethical landscape of plastic surgery, ensuring that the profession remains committed to the highest standards of care and ethical practice.

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DISCLOSURE

The authors have no financial interest to declare in relation to the content of this article.

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