

Board Certification in Cosmetic Surgery

An Examination of Online Advertising Practices

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Background: Aesthetic surgery patients commonly use online resources to select a surgeon. The American Board of Plastic Surgery is the American Board of Medical Specialties member board that certifies plastic surgeons. The American Board of Cosmetic Surgery (ABCS) provides aesthetic surgery credentials through a non-American Board of Medical Specialties-recognized process. This study examines use of the phrases “plastic surgery” and “plastic surgeon” by ABCS-certified surgeons when advertising online.

Methods: Diplomates of the ABCS were identified from the ABCS Web site. Professional Web sites, Facebook business pages, and Instagram profiles were located by online search. Use of the descriptor “plastic” and ABCS board certification on practice Web sites, Facebook business page categorization, and plastic surgery-related hashtag use on Instagram were recorded.

Results: A total of 298 non-American Board of Plastic Surgery-certified ABCS diplomates were included. One hundred eighty-nine (69.5%) categorized their Facebook business page as “plastic surgeon.” Within Instagram posts, 123 (57.2%) used #plasticsurgeon, and 172 (80.0%) used #plasticsurgery. On professional Web sites, 90 (30.4%) identified themselves as a “plastic surgeon,” 123 (41.6%) characterized their practice as “plastic surgery,” and 196 (68.5%) used their ABCS credential to identify as a “board-certified” cosmetic surgeon.

Conclusions: Diplomates of the ABCS frequently use “plastic surgeon” and “plastic surgery” in online advertisements despite a lack of accredited plastic surgery training or board certification. Furthermore, most ABCS diplomates use their ABCS credentials to market themselves as “board-certified” cosmetic surgeons, potentially violating American Medical Association-supported truth in advertising laws in some states and increasing public confusion regarding different board certifications.

Key Words: cosmetic surgery, online advertising, social media, board certification
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Patients often use Internet resources when selecting an aesthetic surgeon. Past studies have demonstrated that up to 95% of patients search online during the surgeon selection process, with the most frequently visited platforms being practice Web sites, Facebook, and Instagram.^{1–3} In turn, a growing number of plastic surgeons report using Internet advertising to generate referrals and acquire patients.^{4,5} The importance of social media engagement is exemplified by how online search rankings correlate with the number of social media followers rather than training or experience.⁶

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Up to 90% of the public considers board certification to be important when selecting an aesthetic surgeon.⁷ Physicians who promote themselves as “board certified” may therefore attract more patients to their practice. However, the public may not be informed about how training requirement differs between certifying boards.¹ The frequent use of plastic surgery-related hashtags by providers who have not completed accredited plastic surgery training and are not board-certified plastic surgeons potentially exploits this lack of awareness.^{8,9} Further research is needed to assess the impact of these advertising practices on patient understanding and decision making, but the potential for confusion seems to exist.

As the primary regulatory body overseeing board certification in the United States, the American Board of Medical Specialties (ABMS) aims to improve patient care through external vetting of its member boards.¹⁰ The American Board of Plastic Surgery (ABPS), 1 of 24 ABMS member boards, certifies physicians in plastic surgery.¹¹ Diplomates of the ABPS are required to complete at least 6 years of surgical residency, with at least 3 years of specialized plastic surgery training accredited by the Accreditation Council for Graduate Medical Education (ACGME). In contrast, the American Board of Cosmetic Surgery (ABCS), which is not recognized by the ABMS, provides physicians with aesthetic surgery credentials through an alternative pathway. Its diplomates complete a 1- or 2-year cosmetic surgery fellowship approved by the American Academy of Cosmetic Surgery after ACGME-, American Osteopathic Association-, or Commission on Dental Accreditation-accredited residency training in a “related” specialty (eg, oral and maxillofacial surgery, thoracic surgery).¹²

To increase public awareness of these training differences, the American Society of Plastic Surgeons (ASPS) launched the “Trust ASPS” campaign, encouraging patients to research their surgeon’s qualifications.¹³ Furthermore, the American Medical Association has advocated for truth in advertising legislation mandating that only physicians certified by an ABMS member board or equivalent (eg, American Board of Facial Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery) can advertise themselves as “board certified.”^{14–17} Both campaigns help empower patients to make informed decisions when selecting an aesthetic surgeon. However, the effectiveness of patient education is limited by a largely unregulated online marketplace with respect to the use of certain phrases, such as “board certified” and “plastic surgeon.” The purpose of this study is to examine how non-ABPS-certified ABCS diplomates use the phrases “plastic surgeon” and “plastic surgery” in online advertisements as well as how they use their ABCS credentials to promote themselves as “board-certified” cosmetic surgeons online. Further study is required to understand the impact of these advertising practices on patient decision making.

METHODS

A list of ABCS diplomates was recorded from the ABCS Web site along with diplomates’ respective cities and states of practice.¹⁸ The ABMS certification database was then used to identify any ABMS board certification of ABCS diplomates.¹⁹ Discrepancies between physicians with similar names were resolved by cross-referencing geographic location. Practice Web sites and social media accounts were located by

Google searches using the physician's name, city and state of practice, and the search terms “cosmetic surgeon,” “Facebook,” and “Instagram.” Diplomates of the ABCS were excluded from analysis if they met one of the following criteria: ABPS board certification, no professional online presence (ie, absence of Web site, Facebook business page, and Instagram profile), practice outside of the United States, or practice in a hospital setting (due to significant limitations on individual physicians' advertising practices within a hospital system).

Data were collected directly from professional Web sites, including use of the adjectives “plastic” and “cosmetic” in practice names as well as utilization of the descriptor “plastic,” ABCS board certification, and ABCS diplomate status within Web site content. Facebook (Facebook Inc, Menlo Park, California) business page categorization was also recorded. Use of the hashtags #plasticsurgeon and #plasticsurgery in Instagram (Facebook Inc) posts was evaluated with the Instaloader application programming interface and a custom Python script.^{20,21} Results were characterized with descriptive statistics.

RESULTS

A total of 396 ABCS diplomates were identified from the ABCS Web site.¹⁸ Two hundred ninety-eight non-ABPS-certified diplomates were included in this study, with 98 excluded based on the criteria outlined previously (Table 1). Of those diplomates included in this analysis, 296 (96.7%) had practice Web sites, 272 (88.9%) had Facebook business pages, and 215 (70.3%) had Instagram profiles (Fig. 1).

We first examined how non-ABPS-certified ABCS diplomates (ie, those who are not plastic surgeons) used the descriptor “plastic” and the phrases “plastic surgeon” and “plastic surgery” when advertising their practice online. Thirty-three (11.1%) ABCS diplomates used the adjective “plastic” in their practice name, whereas 113 (37.9%) used the adjective “cosmetic” (Fig. 2). On their Facebook business page, 189 (69.5%) diplomates used “plastic surgeon” to categorize their business, with 130 (47.8%) selecting it as a primary category and 59 (21.7%) selecting it as a supplementary category (Figs. 2, 3). Within Instagram posts, 123 (57.2%) diplomates used the hashtag #plasticsurgeon and 172 (80.0%) used the hashtag #plasticsurgery, with 119 (55.3%) using both (Fig. 2). On their professional Web sites, 90 (30.4%) ABCS diplomates used the phrase “plastic surgeon” to describe themselves and 123 (41.6%) used “plastic surgery” to characterize the services they offer (Fig. 2).

Next, we evaluated how ABCS diplomates use their ABCS credentials when promoting themselves online. Of the 296 ABCS diplomates with practice Web sites, 238 (83.2%) mentioned ABCS, with 196 (68.5%) noting their board certification by ABCS and 84 (29.4%) noting their status as an ABCS diplomate (Fig. 4). Two hundred seven (72.4%) diplomates also included their ABCS credential when listing their qualifications, with 107 (37.4%) using it to highlight their multiple board certifications (Fig. 4).

DISCUSSION

Patients frequently use online resources, such as professional Web sites and social media accounts, when selecting an aesthetic surgeon.¹⁻³ However, an unregulated online marketplace with respect to advertising

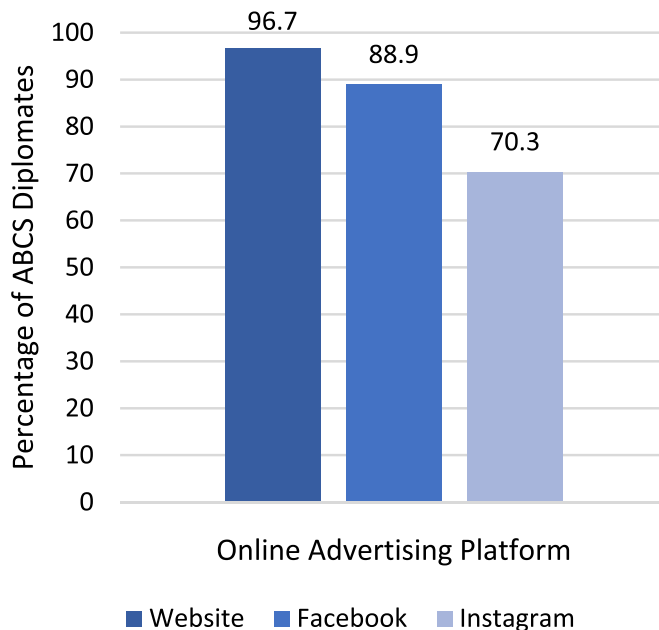


FIGURE 1. Online marketing platforms used by ABCS diplomates. full color online

practices leaves patients vulnerable to misleading information. This is exemplified by how many patients value board certification as a signifier of competence,^{7,22,23} yet few can distinguish between certification by different boards. In fact, one survey demonstrated that a large majority of the general public is unaware of what board certification is required of a plastic surgeon, with 96% either identifying an ABCS-credentialed surgeon as a plastic surgeon or being unsure.¹ As such, the purpose of this study is to characterize how ABCS diplomates not certified by ABPS use the terms “plastic surgeon” and “plastic surgery” to promote themselves and their practices online.

On its Web site, ABCS claims that its certification process is superior to the ACGME-accredited training of plastic surgeons because its American Academy of Cosmetic Surgery fellowships limit their focus to cosmetic surgery, whereas plastic surgeons train in both cosmetic and reconstructive techniques.²⁴ Because of their diplomates' narrower training, ABCS draws a distinction between “plastic surgeons” and “cosmetic surgeons,” arguing that the latter is better equipped to perform aesthetic procedures.²⁴ Despite this claim of superiority, our study of non-ABPS-certified ABCS diplomates demonstrates that members of this population frequently promote themselves as “plastic surgeons” and their services as “plastic surgery” within their practice names, professional Web sites, Facebook business pages, and Instagram profiles. However, non-ABPS-certified ABCS diplomates have neither completed accredited training nor received board certification in plastic surgery.²⁵ Use of the language “plastic surgeon” and “plastic surgery” by these diplomates therefore has the potential to mislead patients about the extent and character of their physician's training background. “Trust ASPS” and other public education campaigns by professional societies are meant to counteract this by empowering patients to discern these differences and make an informed decision about their surgeon.¹³ Increasing public awareness about the significance of different aesthetic credentials remains essential, especially as one survey showed that only 13% of patients are aware that any licensed physician, regardless of training background, can legally perform aesthetic surgery.⁷

Regarding Facebook business pages, Facebook gives page owners the ability to select up to 3 “categories” when designing their page.²⁶ Page owners can select “plastic surgeon” as a category, but Facebook

TABLE 1. Characteristics of Excluded ABCS Diplomates

Reason for Exclusion	No. ABCS Diplomates, %
ABPS board certification	8 (8.2)
No professional online presence	58 (59.2)
Practice outside the United States	14 (14.3)
Practice in a hospital setting	18 (18.4)

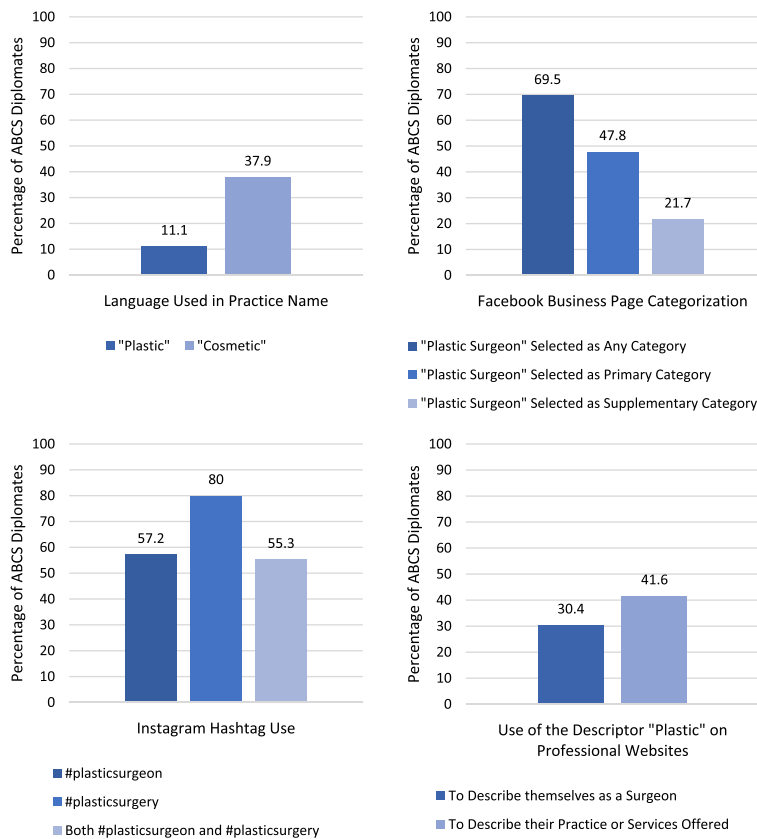


FIGURE 2. Use of the descriptor “plastic” and the phrases “plastic surgeon” and “plastic surgery” by ABCS diplomates within practice names (top left; n = 298), Facebook business pages (top right; n = 272), Instagram accounts (bottom left; n = 215), and professional Web sites (bottom right; n = 296).

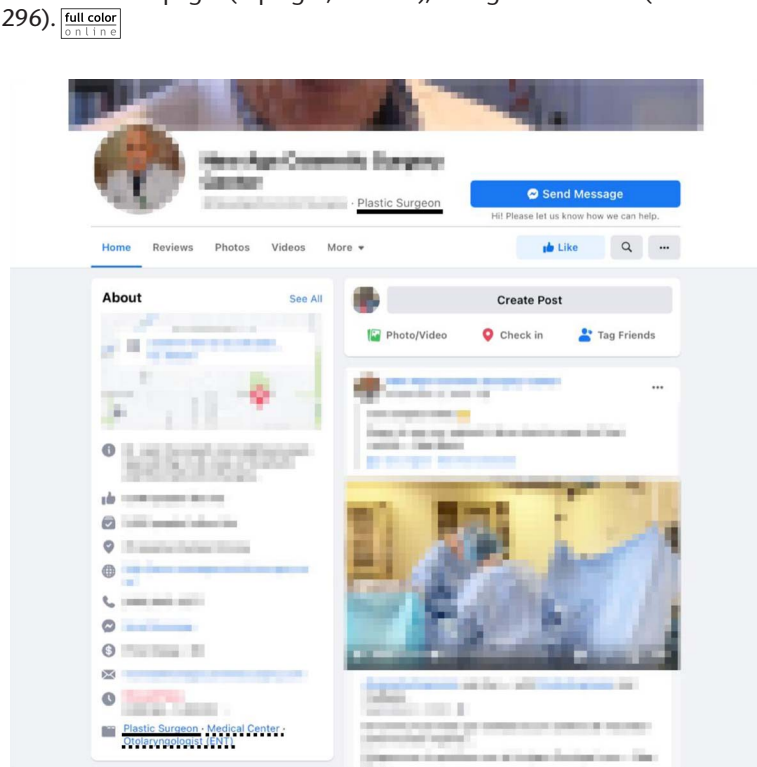


FIGURE 3. Desktop layout of a Facebook business page. The placement of the primary category on the webpage is underlined with a solid line, and the placement of the 2 supplementary categories is underlined with dotted lines.

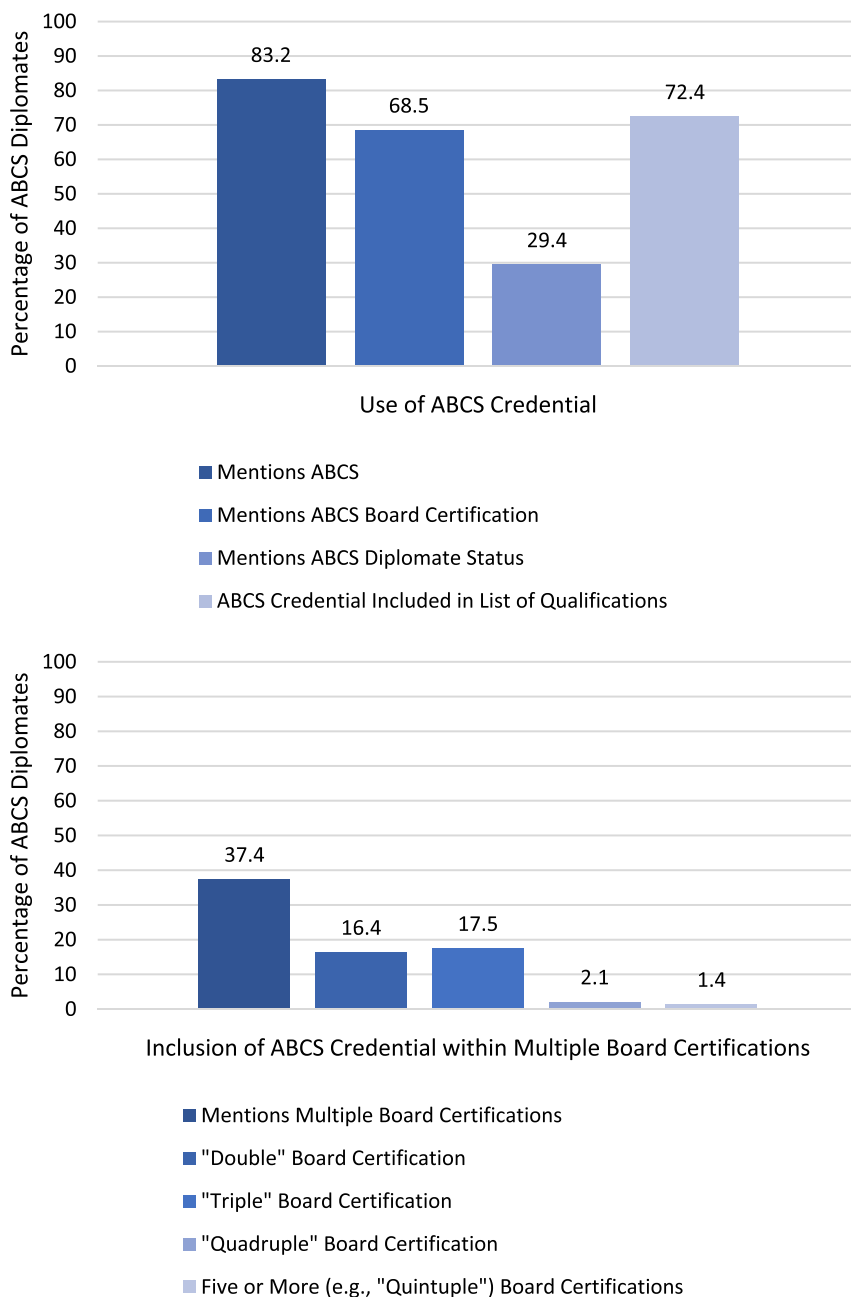


FIGURE 4. Diplomates of the ABCS use their ABCS credential (top, n = 296) and inclusion of their ABCS credential when noting multiple board certifications (bottom, n = 296) on professional Web sites. full color online

does not provide “cosmetic surgeon” or “aesthetic surgeon” as options.²⁷ With almost 70% of ABCS diplomates categorizing their business as “plastic surgeon” on Facebook, this exemplifies a structural limitation of this social media platform that makes it more difficult for the public to distinguish between the different training backgrounds of aesthetic surgeons. This is especially true given that page categorization is used to prioritize search results. A layperson who searches for a “plastic surgeon” will be directed to any business page that has indicated “plastic surgeon” as a category, regardless of whether the physician is ABPS certified, a non-ABPS-certified ABCS diplomate, or not certified at all. To address this, we recommend that Facebook expand its business page categories to include “cosmetic surgeon” or an open response

option to allow providers greater precision in describing their field of practice so that it aligns with the scope of their training and certification. This would give ABCS diplomates the ability to accurately represent their practices as cosmetic surgeons, consistent with their certification by ABCS.

In addition, nearly 70% of ABCS diplomates use their ABCS credential to market themselves as “board-certified” cosmetic surgeons on their professional Web sites. However, truth in advertising legislation present in several states (eg, California, Florida, Nevada, New Jersey) mandates that physicians can only claim to be “board certified” if the certifying board is an ABMS member or deemed equivalent.¹⁴⁻¹⁷ Because of ABCS certification not necessitating completion of an ACGME- or

American Osteopathic Association-accredited training program in cosmetic surgery, the ABCS has not viewed as an ABMS equivalent by some state medical boards (exceptions include Texas and Oklahoma).^{14–17} However, given the dynamic and largely unregulated nature of the online marketplace, truth in advertising legislation can be difficult to enforce. One study found no appreciable difference in the rates of non-ABPS-certified practitioners advertising as “plastic surgeons” between states with and without truth in advertising laws.¹⁵ Furthermore, many ABCS diplomates include their ABCS credential when emphasizing their multiple qualifications, either by listing it alongside other board certifications or by counting it toward their total number of board certifications (eg, “triple board certified”). Without an understanding of the differences between board certifications, these actions can potentially exacerbate public confusion about differing board certifications. A patient is likely to equate ABCS certification with ABMS member board certification when both are included in the same list or counted toward the same total.

This study has limitations. First, data were collected from online sources at a single time point. Given the dynamic nature of online advertising, it is possible that our assessment of this population's marketing practices would change depending on the timing of analysis. Second, with this methodology, we are unable to assess how the online advertising practices outlined previously influence patients' perception and understanding of a physician's training background and qualifications or how they impact patients' decision making when selecting a surgeon. This remains an area of future study.

CONCLUSIONS

Our review of the online advertising practices of non-ABPS-certified ABCS diplomates reveals that most—up to 80% depending on the platform—use the phrases “plastic surgeon” and “plastic surgery” to describe themselves and their practice despite having no accredited training or board certification as a plastic surgeon. Furthermore, almost 70% of diplomates market themselves as “board-certified” cosmetic surgeons on the basis of their ABCS credential. Both practices may lead patients to confuse ABCS certification with ABPS certification, causing them to misinterpret the extent of their surgeon's training. Increased efforts to educate the public about board certification and regulate the online marketplace are therefore necessary to ensure that patients can make an informed decision about their aesthetic surgeon.

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