

Emerging Roles of Social Media in Dermatology

Julie Ann Amthor Croley, MD



RESIDENT PEARL

- The emerging presence of social media in dermatology provides opportunities for dermatologists to participate in dissemination and consumption of reliable health information, marketing, social networking among colleagues, and motivation and inspiration. It has been proposed that participation may serve to prevent resident burnout.

The rise of social media in dermatology provides dermatologists novel academic, business, and personal growth opportunities. Unique challenges include blind authorship, lack of source citation, and presentation of opinion as fact.

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As the residents on the podium ran through case presentations at the Texas Dermatological Society meeting this past fall (September 21-22, 2018; Galveston, Texas), I discretely surveyed the room. To no surprise, perhaps half of the attendees at some point during the hour-long presentation glanced down at their smartphones, and 2018 statistics suggest that approximately 74% of these Internet glances were made by engagers of social media sites.¹ My FOMO (fear of missing out) kicked in. What was everyone looking at? I opened Instagram on my smartphone and plastered at the top of my home page were Texas Dermatological Society–related “stories” posted by other dermatology residents from across the state, one story featuring the very presentation I was attending. I peeked 2 rows ahead to find the social media “influencer” I have been following on Instagram for months in real life for the first time.

It is not just the younger population glued to their social media accounts. In fact, Facebook boasted a more than 80% increase in users 55 years and older between 2011 and 2014 and a 41% increase in users aged 35 to 54 years.² In total, there were 3.2 billion social media users globally in 2018.³ With such a large portion of the population engaged in social media, it is no wonder that it has become a rapidly emerging presence within the field of dermatology.

#Ad

Social media has become a powerful marketing tool for the practicing dermatologist. In a recent survey, 41% of social media users reported that social media influenced their choice of a particular physician, facility, or medical practice.⁴ Corresponding to this behavior, dermatology practices also have used social media to educate patients on services offered, acquire new patients, engage existing patients, create brand loyalty, become a trusted source of medical information in a sea of digital misinformation, and facilitate positive word-of-mouth opportunities.⁵ In fact, 53% of physician practices in the United States operate a Facebook page.⁶ For these physicians, marketing through social media carries the advantages of low cost and rapid transmission of information to a wide audience.⁷ Furthermore, the development of business insights and statistics by some social media platforms, such as those available to users on business profiles on Instagram, enables practices and marketers to target their audiences and optimize reach.

#DermLife

The role of social media in dermatology extends far beyond marketing. Lifestyle blogs centered on daily life as a medical provider, even within the field of dermatology, are gaining popularity. Dermatology-centered lifestyle

From the Department of Dermatology, The University of Texas Medical Branch at Galveston.

Follow Dr. Croley on Instagram @dr.skinandsmiles.

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Correspondence: Julie Ann Amthor Croley, MD, Office of the Department of Dermatology, 301 University Blvd, 4.112 McCollough Bldg, Galveston, TX 77555 (jaamthor@utmb.edu).

blogs often incorporate the root *derm* in their handle, enabling other users to identify the account holder and interact in meaningful ways. According to a post from one popular Instagram influencer Dr. Audrey Sue Cruz (@dr.audreysue), such profiles may serve to prevent burnout, provide a creative outlet, share life as a resident, develop a supportive community, provide mentorship, and spread inspiration.

#Hashtag

Another interesting utility of social media is the use of standardized hashtags to facilitate scientific and clinical dialogue among medical professionals. Standardization of hashtag ontology on Twitter and Instagram has been adopted by the urology and gastroenterology fields to filter out “noise” by individuals not intending to join academic discussion.⁸ In dermatology, standardized hashtags have not been adopted, to my knowledge; however, a search for esoteric dermatologic terms such as #dermatopathology or #mohssurgery directs users to specialty-specific discussions.

#DontFryDay

Another role of social media in dermatology is dissemination of information. One notable example is the reach on Twitter of the “Don’t Fry Day” campaign, an annual campaign by the National Council on Skin Cancer Prevention to promote sun safety awareness and sun protection behaviors. In a recent study by Nguyen et al,⁹ the hashtag #DontFryDay was tracked on Twitter to assess the reach of the campaign. They found that this campaign had an impressive reach of approximately 1200 contributors, resulting in more than 16.5 million impressions; 18 celebrities and verified individuals accounted for 8,735,549 impressions.⁹

Despite the large potential for dissemination of information on social media, in 2014 none of the top 10 dermatologic journals or professional dermatologic organizations maintained an Instagram account. Only one of the top 10 patient advocate groups related to dermatology conditions—the Melanoma Research Foundation—was found on Instagram as of 2014.¹⁰ Furthermore, none of the top 10 most popular dermatology journals, professional dermatology organizations, or dermatology-related patient advocate groups could be found on Tumblr as of 2014.¹¹ Although some of the aforementioned organizations have since adopted social media accounts, such as *Cutis* and *Dermatology News* (@mdedgederm) on Instagram in 2018, these social media platforms remain largely untapped outlets for dissemination of information to the public by reputable sources.

#VerifyHealthcare

Although social media has offered many advantages to the field of dermatology, it also has brought about unique challenges such as blind authorship, lack of source

citation, and presentation of opinion as fact.⁷ To compound the challenge, 90% of millennials aged 18 to 24 years reportedly trust health care information shared by others on social media.¹² Do we, as dermatologists, have a duty to take to social media to provide reputable health information? In an effort to address this emerging problem, popular Instagram influencer Dr. Austin Chiang (@austinchiangmd) initiated the #VerifyHealthcare movement, which called for physicians active on social media to practice transparency by providing users with their credentials.¹³ The goal of the movement is to help users differentiate medical information disseminated by trained medical professionals from misinformation by disreputable sources.

Final Thoughts

Despite its shortcomings, the emerging roles of social media in dermatology have proven to be a prominent force here to stay, providing new and innovative opportunities to dermatologists for social networking, dissemination of health information, motivation and inspiration, and marketing.

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