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Public social media consultations for dermatologic conditions: an online survey

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Abstract

The use of social media in medicine has been increasingly studied in recent years, especially concerning its role in patient outreach, education, diagnosis, and management. Dermatology is a unique field in that patients can post photographs of their skin ailments when seeking online medical advice and information. This study examines the role of public social media consultations for dermatologic conditions. A large portion of patients utilize social media for dermatologic consultations and many do not seek care from a dermatologist afterward. Future studies should trend this phenomenon, especially as the use of social media continues to expand.

Keywords: dermatology social media, dermatology consultations, dermatology internet

Introduction

In recent years, there has been considerable interest in the use of social media in medicine, especially in the field of dermatology [1, 2]. It is estimated that about half of households use the internet to find health-related information and resources [3]. Social media may offer patient benefits, including social, emotional, and informational support [4]. It can also offer a venue for professional conversation and advice, such as with Facebook groups that are dedicated solely to board-certified dermatologists. However, with the abundance of non-expert advice and ease of dissemination, it can be challenging for

patients to find unbiased, expert information. Misinformation is widespread [5]. Patients often consider an online influencer's or blogger's number of followers to be associated with offering verified and factual information [6]. There also exists a culture of online public consultations being performed on social media. Dermatology issues are particularly unique, since patients can post photographs of their skin ailments when seeking medical information and advice. Frequently, responses are not from qualified medical professionals, which can lead to mismanagement, delayed diagnoses, and poor outcomes. This study attempts to examine current practices of public social media consultations for dermatologic conditions.

Methods

An online survey was posted to dermatology-relevant Facebook groups in 2019. The survey contained demographic information in addition to questions pertaining to social media use, especially in regard to dermatologic concerns.

Results

A total of 261 respondents completed the survey. The mean age was 27.1 years, and 77.0% were female. Respondents identified as White (not Hispanic or Latino, 75.9%), Asian (11.9%), Black or African American (3.8%), Hispanic or Latino (3.8%), and other (4.6%). The majority lived in an urban

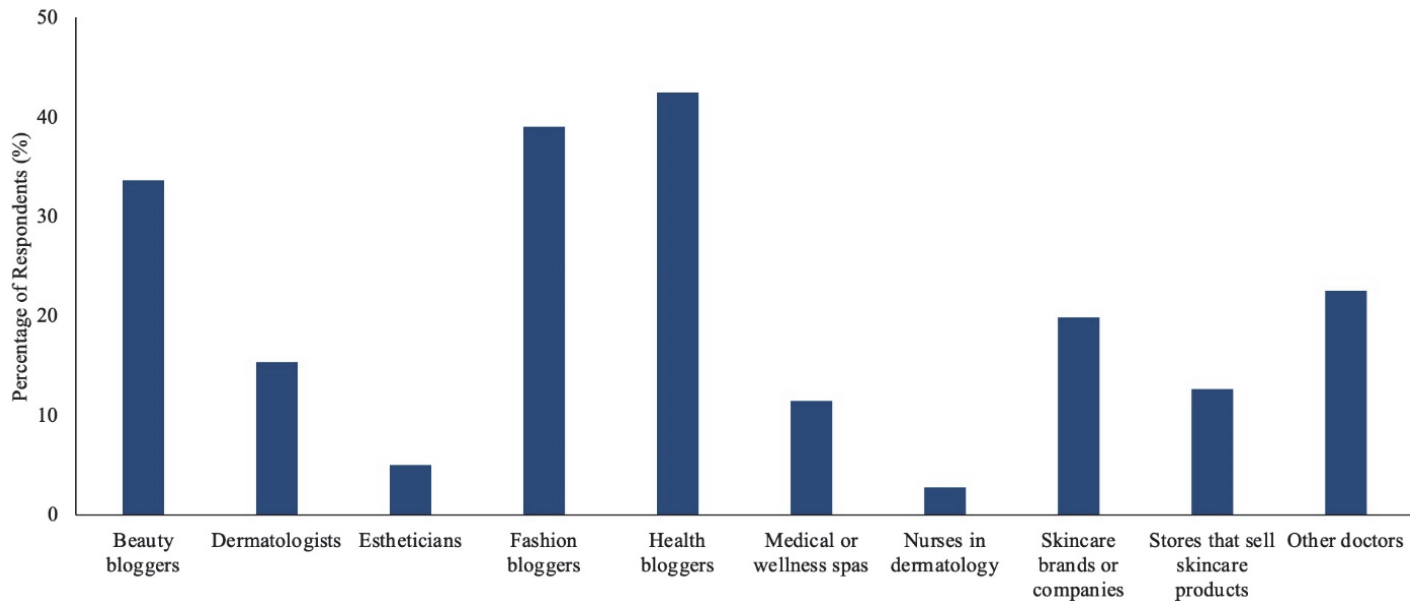


Figure 1. Various accounts that respondents follow or read on social media.

location (73.2%) compared to suburban (23.0%) and rural (3.8%) settings.

The vast majority of respondents utilize social media a few times per day (90.4%) versus once daily (5.0%), a few days per week (2.3%), a few days per month (1.9%), or a few days per year (0.4%). Various social media platforms used included Facebook (88.5%), Instagram (84.7%), Snapchat (66.3%), YouTube (47.1%), Twitter (28.4%), and Reddit (21.5%).

Respondents follow and read posts from various types of accounts on social media (**Figure 1**). The top 10 topics of posts in which respondents are most interested are skincare products (59.4%), anti-aging (47.8%), hair products (41.1%), acne (40.6%), sun protection (40.6%), laser and body contouring procedures (20.7%), tanning (18.3%), eczema (10.7%), rosacea (8.5%), and injectable neurotoxins and fillers (8.0%). The majority (64.4%) wish that more high-quality advice for dermatology issues was available on social media.

Among all respondents, 39.5% have consulted social media for a skin-related condition. Those living in a rural setting did so more than those in suburban and urban settings (80.0% versus 38.1%, $P=0.008$). Those more likely to schedule an appointment with a dermatologist who is active on social media also consulted social media more (59.2% versus 32.5%,

$P=0.00009$). The top reasons for using social media included learning about the experience of others (74.8%), searching for medical information (51.5%), posting a question (11.7%), posting a photograph (1.9%), and other reasons (5.8%).

Of those who consulted social media and were willing to share, 47.9% and 13.5% did so before and after seeing a dermatologist, respectively, whereas 38.5% did not see a dermatologist. The top 10 specific conditions posted for consultation are listed in **Table 1**. The top 5 specific reasons for consulting social media included relative ease compared to seeing a dermatologist (44.8%), not thinking they needed to see a dermatologist (35.4%), lower cost

Table 1. Top 10 specific skin-related conditions that respondents consulted for on social media.

Skin-Related Condition	%
Acne	54.2
Eczema or dry skin	19.8
Hair loss or thinning	17.7
Sun spots	14.6
Wrinkles	13.5
Excess fat	11.5
Insect bite	10.4
Mole	10.4
Cyst	9.4
Cold sore or herpes	8.3

than seeing a dermatologist (22.9%), shorter wait time than seeing a dermatologist (12.5%), and not trusting their dermatologist (3.1%). Interestingly, the majority (76.0%) believed that the information they received was trustworthy.

Discussion

Consistent with a prior study, many survey respondents have consulted social media to obtain health-related information [7]. Similarly, many never see their physician after consulting social media for medical concerns [8, 9]. A large portion of respondents consulted social media prior to seeking professional advice. Despite often-unreliable information available on the internet, many respondents indicated that they trust the information they received. A delay in obtaining qualified medical advice may ultimately lead to diagnostic delays and mismanagement of dermatologic conditions. Dermatologists should be aware of this trend in order to provide appropriate patient counseling and caution the dangers of online public medical consultations.

According to our results, people are more likely to seek a dermatologist who is active on social media.

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Through online engagement, providers are able to improve patient education and outreach in addition to the patient experience. Social media provides a non-traditional means to establish a patient-provider relationship outside of the clinic. The posting of online photographs or videos may allow people to feel more connected and familiar with providers. Posts of real patients may also help to create a sense of trust before actually meeting the provider in person. However, no studies have thoroughly examined the reasons why patients are more likely to choose a dermatologist who is active on social media. Future studies are needed to assess this behavior.

Conclusion

Patients frequently utilize social media for public consultations of dermatologic conditions. Dermatologists should be aware of this trend in order to offer improved patient education and patient care.

Potential conflicts of interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interests.