

How Patients Are Using Social Media

Here's what every healthcare professional should know.

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Today's patients have an unprecedented amount of healthcare information at their fingertips before entering a clinic for the first time. Social media often provides the platform through which patients become equipped with this healthcare information. Social media is a constantly evolving, Internet-based tool that consists of varying platforms where users can share content, pictures, videos, and music, send messages, create blog posts, network with colleagues and peers, and listen to podcasts. As lifelong learners, we medical professionals must continue to stay aware of which social media

platforms are currently being used by patients and then use this knowledge to our benefit. This can mean using a popular social media platform for disseminating healthcare resources, advocating for marginalized patient populations, or clarifying medical misinformation. What were previous-

even more resources at their disposal and challenges to overcome.

Demographics

To be able to practice and provide the best healthcare, it is important to understand the magnitude of the presence of social media in patients'

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ly the most popular forms of social media known to healthcare professionals practicing in the early 2000s—Myspace and Tumblr—have been pushed aside for the “new and improved” platforms of Tik Tok, Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram. New social media platforms come into favor all the time, meaning tomorrow's patients and healthcare professionals will have

everyday lives. Following the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been a sharp increase in healthcare information spread through social media. According to the 2022 Global Digital Overview Report, there are approximately 4.74 billion social media users worldwide, making up 59.3% of the population.¹ The report notes an additional 190 mil-

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lion new users in 2021 alone. Although social media serves a different purpose for each individual, it is important to analyze the breakdown of the demographic each platform attracts and how users interact with the information provided. Young women ages 16 to 24 are more likely to use Instagram, whereas women aged 35 to 44 turn to Facebook. This can be an important distinction, because Instagram and Facebook use very different media formats. Instagram tends to be pictures and short-form content; Facebook lends itself to longer posts and communities. Content creators on these platforms understand these differences and tailor their information differently according to the platform. Another notable example is TikTok, a popular media platform that is used by younger people and displays short video clips of current trends. Healthcare information spread through TikTok must be in video format and last less than three minutes. It is imperative for healthcare professionals to understand each platform and how healthcare information is consumed on each one.

The Positives

Social media sits firmly at the center of daily life and can be used positively by patients with the right guidance. Patients can research their conditions and connect with others, empowering them to be actively involved in their own healthcare. Online social media support groups, such as those on [breastcancer.org](https://www.breastcancer.org), help patients make connections with others who have the same diagnosis and have been proven to have positive health outcomes. Similarly, sites where individuals can come together to grieve the loss of loved ones, such as [griefshare.org](https://www.griefshare.org), provide a welcoming, safe environment for patients coping with such hardships. Gupta, et al.² conducted a scoping review of social media usage by patients and noted Facebook as the primary platform used for disease-specific groups and healthcare information. Healthcare professionals should be aware of these platforms and how they are being used and include them in patient-centered counseling. Social

media serves different purposes for each individual, but patients commonly search for information about a disease, patients with similar experiences, groups that offer emotional support, and information on medication side effects.² Social media is very often the first place people turn for more information regarding their healthcare concerns, and they often enter the clinic already primed with information from these sources.

have a humanizing effect on healthcare professionals and increase the approachability of providers. This, in turn, helps patients feel more comfortable and confident, thus further increasing patient satisfaction.

As more and more healthcare information is made available on the Internet, patients will continue to look for information on social media regardless of who is producing that content. Healthcare professionals must remain

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Patients and Physicians

Social media facilitates communication not only with other patients who share a diagnosis, but also with their healthcare professionals, giving patients a sense of comfort. Social media is at the forefront of communication, and increasing accessibility with their healthcare professional creates a positive impact on the patient-provider relationship. Constructing a social media presence for a healthcare group or system can greatly improve patient satisfaction by establishing an easily accessible route through which patients can submit general questions, be updated on any changes within the facility, and search for answers regarding common concerns such as vaccine recommendations during flu season, among many other possibilities.

For example, during surges in new cases of COVID-19, new research, guidelines, and recommendations were steadily being released. If a healthcare group has a social media presence, this information can be easily disseminated for their patient population. This has multiple positive effects, such as helping patients stay informed and allowing patients to feel confident in the information they are receiving because it is coming from a trusted source that they are familiar with. In addition, establishing a social media presence can

be aware of who is creating and spreading healthcare information, because patients' healthcare decisions will be influenced by the information they read. Whether the information is coming from healthcare professionals sending out evidence-based material with trusted sources or non-healthcare professionals who are sharing their own stories and unproven homemade remedies, patients often do not thoroughly fact check what they read. As one example, a currently prominent figure on Instagram is the self-proclaimed "Liver King." With a following of 1.7 million, he is using the platform to spread a message about primal living and consuming a diet of raw meats; and he often is the first result on search engines regarding these topics.

Information and Misinformation

Healthcare professionals should be aware that not all of the information their patients are acquiring comes from vetted sources. Inherent flaws of social media include the ease with which it is possible to spread misinformation. De Martino, et al.³ address the quality of information available on social media, noting that low barriers to publication, ease of public availability, and the possibility of alteration all pose challenges. Although there are guidelines in place to differentiate high-quality from low-quality information (e.g., DISCERN

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and HONcode), many social media users either are unaware of these quality index markers or are not obtaining their information from sites subject to these instruments. Each social media platform has different content regulations and fact-checking mechanisms. Understanding the intricacies of each platform will help the medical professional refute incorrect information patients have obtained online and guide them toward more reliable platforms. By staying up-to-date with current trends in the media, healthcare professionals can confidently confirm claims or refute misinformation when patients come to them with questions regarding the newest viral fad.

trying to get a message across about healthcare information.

Because social media has evolved into a powerful tool at the center of everyday life, it is important to incorporate it into the modern-day office visit. This can be as simple as asking patients how they use social media at a wellness visit or annual exam. In a study of social media and patient interaction, Smailhodzic, et al.⁴ found that patients often do not turn to social media for primary healthcare advice, but rather as supplemental advice. Knowing this, and that patients may well come across medically inaccurate information, it becomes even more important for physicians to be aware of what resources are available online and in their immediate community. It will

ever, if a healthcare professional decides to create their own social media presence and distribute information, knowing which audience uses each platform and how they interact with it is critical to effective communication. Healthcare professionals can turn social media into an effective ally by creating a digital environment where patients feel confident that they can trust the information they read online.⁵ Adapting your medical practice to strike a balance between providing in-office medical care and producing evidence-based information onto easily accessible platforms should be the new normal. **PM**

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The Retention Question

Healthcare professionals should be cognizant of another interesting factor regarding social media, which is how much content users are retaining. Social media offers a variety of information, ranging from health information to a friend's activities. The amount of information patients see varies dramatically from platform to platform and patient to patient. Their feeds can be curated depending on who they follow, what they like, and how they interact with different platforms. In addition, different formats, such as video, long-form articles, infographics, images, and so on can lead to patients retaining different key takeaways. With exposure to so much content, it is fair to ask how much influence information on social media has and if there is a way to increase retention. There may not be a definitive answer, but there are simple ways to increase retention when formatting content, including using short sentences, fun fonts, bright colors, visual aids and charts, and so on. Although learning retention may not be a priority when viewing a friend's activity on social media, it is much more important when healthcare professionals are

be important to guide patients who report a strong social media presence toward credible and trusted sources. This can be made simpler by having educational packets available on proper social media usage. Educational packets can include basics such as finding information that has cited sources and using websites that are HONcode certified. Packets can include a list of verified sources for common topics such as nutrition, weight loss, seasonal illnesses, and at-home remedies.

Striking a Balance

Social media encompasses a wide range of communication platforms. There are media options for social and professional networking, video/photo sharing, and content production. As a healthcare professional in today's digital age, it is essential to be aware that your patient population is spending more time on the Internet than in the past. At the very least, healthcare professionals should be cognizant of the varying quality of healthcare information available on social media websites. Healthcare professionals should be ready to provide patients with education to support or refute current health trends and combat misinformation on social media. How-

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