

Social Media and Dermatology: A Relationship That Is More Than Skin Deep

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Introduction

Over three billion people worldwide are active users of social media, and patients are more readily utilizing it to obtain healthcare information.¹ Dermatologists have a large presence on social media, and it has become a useful platform to educate and communicate accurate information with the public.¹ Recent articles have also shown that social media activity is correlated with patient satisfaction and publication citations.^{2,3,4} Therefore, there is increasing interest about how to best utilize social media in practice and which platforms to engage on. I have interviewed four WDS members and prominent social media influencers in dermatology to provide some insight and perspective on their goals, future directions, and everything in between.

What are the goals of your social media presence as a dermatologist?

Joyce Park (@teawithmd, teawithmd.com): When I created my blog as a medical student, I used it as an outlet to discuss the difficulties of medical school, ups and downs of the residency application process, and how to choose a specialty. I started creating more educational content when I became a dermatology resident. Education remains one of my main goals, as well as building my own brand so I can use it to promote whatever business venture I decide to pursue in the future, such as starting a private practice. I also use it for research. During the pandemic, I offered to mentor medical students. I divided them into working groups, and we have had multiple zoom meetings and published several papers as a result. It has grown into something I never imagined it could be.

Jennifer Choi (@dermdoc.jen): My main goal is education. I wanted to bring awareness to topics that weren't being discussed as much, including skin cancer, and to be a voice showing that there are dermatologists taking care of complex medical dermatology patients. I quickly received feedback and encouraging messages from medical students who shared they didn't realize the wide scope of dermatology, and started to develop an interest in it. I want to share what a career in academics can be like as well. An added benefit has been the development of a community with colleagues. I have been able to meet many wonderful dermatologists who I would not have crossed paths with otherwise.

Tiffany Libby (@dermdoclibby): I started my page in fellowship, and my main goal was to share my love of Mohs surgery and facial reconstruction. It has since evolved with my career, and I would describe my page as a mix of a Dermatologic surgery, family, and skin care education. Joyce Park's 2018 paper⁵ highlighted the reality that the majority of dermatology-related posts on Instagram were actually not made by dermatologists. There is so much medical misinformation, and it is important for us as dermatologists to have a forum in social media to dispel those myths.

Elizabeth Bahar Houshmand (@houshmandmd): I started on social media to share educational content and use it as an opportunity to provide factual information from a board-certified dermatologist for dermatology colleagues, patients, and the general public. There is a lot of medical misinformation on social media. Board-certified dermatologists are the true skin experts, and I use the platform to highlight our education and training and the breadth of conditions we treat. The general public predominantly recognizes us for cosmetics, but we are the skin, hair and nail experts, we are surgeons and we manage a multitude of diseases. Over time, it has also been a way fun to meet and engage with colleagues and others through social media from all around the world.

How important is a social media presence for new dermatologists?

EBH: My advice for residents is to focus on your dermatology training. As a resident, your top priority should be your dermatology knowledge and providing outstanding care to your patients. I was not on social media during my training; it is a personal decision. Social media can be a great way to connect with other physician colleagues.

TL: It is different for each person. I don't think it is necessary to put pressure on yourself to build a robust social media presence as a new dermatologist. Showing before/after photos of surgical or cosmetic patients could be helpful in recruiting new patients if you are trying to grow your practice.

JP: It depends on your goals. If you are starting out in private practice, it can be a way to recruit patients, especially if sharing before/after photos. If you want to be established as a key opinion leader, by delivering consistent fact-based information, brands will look to you to consult for them. This could be in the form of providing advice on formulations or as an influence to post content on their behalf. If you are interested in any of these things, then it might be a useful tool.

JC: Know your "why" – why you are doing it, and not other people telling you that you should. If having a social media presence aligns with your goals, such as bringing awareness to your practice, driving in patients, seeking opportunities with industry, or establishing yourself as an expert or building your own brand within your field, it can be a great tool. By sharing cases you see, or sharing knowledge about certain topics, opportunities may

present themselves. For example, companies may reach out to collaborate and use your presence to promote their brand, or other media outlets may invite you as an expert for an interview.

Do you think there is a particular platform that is most crucial to be active on?

JP: You can find a platform that you like and that jives with your interests. The demographics vary based on the platforms. There is a group of dermatologists on Clubhouse, and each Wednesday we discuss business matters related to practice. Whereas the audience on TikTok is younger, and the content I share is more fun and creative.

JC: I don't think there is a single platform in particular that is most crucial to be active on. Each platform seems to have a different focus. For example, Instagram highlights images or videos, while Twitter lends to short bursts of text. I have found that Twitter is also a great way to connect with other medical colleagues. Physicians share papers and research findings, and discuss important, trending matters in healthcare. For dermatologists on Twitter, I recommend following #medtwitter and #dermtwitter

What do you think the future of social media and dermatology is?

EBH: The future of dermatology on social media is very bright. There is a lot of interest in skincare, wellness, medicine, and science. As board certified dermatologists, we have so much to contribute to this discussion. We can be helpful in sharing our knowledge. I see us as a source of evidence-based information provided in an approachable professional manner. My advice is to stay authentic to your message and who you are. Your social media should really be a reflection of who you are. I think it is such a great tool for outreach and I personally enjoy engaging with others.

JP: More and more dermatologists are becoming open to the idea of social media and are starting to explore the space. We need social media to reclaim our space as experts in the skincare world, lend a credible voice and advocate for our specialty. You have to evaluate what you think it is important to share with the public in a way that it is going to be received well.

JC: It is here to stay. There has been a rapid increase in the number of dermatologists on social media, and it will likely continue to grow even more. My advice is to be authentic and stay professional, but have fun.

What are the pitfalls of social media for patients and physicians? Is there a way to avoid them?

JC: For patients, the main pitfall is the legitimacy of who they are getting information from – “skinfluencers” vs dermatologists. This can lead to a lot of misinformation. One pitfall for physicians to keep in mind is by publicizing yourself, you may become susceptible to trolling. Additionally, followers may ask for personal medical advice and you are put in a position where you must either ignore them or provide a standardized statement that you cannot give medical advice because of legal liability.

TL: It can be very time consuming, and there is such a thing as social media burnout. I definitely experienced this in my earlier involvement with social media, but since then I have come to realize how important it is to prioritize and set your boundaries. For me, I am content with the level of social media interaction I am currently engaged in and some exciting media partnerships have resulted. My time spent on social media has

decreased significantly since I started, and I now spend more time working directly with brands on product development and media engagements, which I truly enjoy.

JP: Be mindful of what you are posting and protecting patient privacy. Even if you are not revealing someone's identity (HIPPA compliant), think about how you would feel if your doctor was posting about you. Always ask permission prior to sharing. It is easy to blur the lines between what is appropriate and acceptable and what isn't. It is also important to keep in mind that everything online lasts forever, so don't write something you might be embarrassed about. Treat people how you treat them in real life, with respect and professionalism.

Conclusion

Despite its flaws, social media's role in dermatology is only growing. The emerging roles of social media in dermatology include education and dissemination medical information, networking and mentorship, and marketing and self-promotion. As more data comes out that social media activity may influence patient satisfaction, patient recruitment, physician-physician interaction, academic relevance (citation rating), and even care delivery, it becomes increasingly important to be aware of its power and the ways in which it can be utilized. The best way to incorporate it into practice has yet to be determined, and ultimately varies on an individual basis. According to our influencers, it allows for meaningful connections with colleagues and patients as well as establishing one's brand by sharing credible information which may lead to industry partnership and more widespread recognition. Most importantly, we must maintain our professionalism, as physicians, as a specialty, and not compromise our values for a "like" or a follower.

Follow @womensdermsociety on Instagram and Facebook, and @womensderm on Twitter!

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