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Commentary

Dermatology on Instagram

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Abstract

The novel photo-sharing social networking platform, Instagram, has an impressive following of 75 million daily users, with a predominantly younger and female demographic. This study investigated the presence of dermatology-related content on Instagram. The most popular professional dermatological organizations, dermatology journals, and dermatology related patient advocate groups on Facebook and Twitter, determined from a prior study, were searched for established profiles on Instagram. In addition, dermatology-related terms (i.e. dermatology, dermatologist, alopecia, eczema, melanoma, psoriasis, and skin cancer) and dermatology-related hashtags (i.e. #dermatology, #dermatologist, #melanoma, #acne, #psoriasis, and #alopecia) were searched. None of the top ten dermatological journals or professional dermatological organizations were found on Instagram. Although only one of the top ten patient advocate groups related to dermatology conditions, Melanoma Research Foundation, had an Instagram presence, there were many private offices, cosmetic products, and some patient advocacy groups. This novel social networking platform could grant dermatology journals and other professional organizations a unique opportunity to reach younger demographic populations, particularly women, with the potential for true educational and life-changing impact.

Keywords: Instagram, dermatology, social media, dermatology journals, dermatology organizations, dermatology advocacy groups, young adults, hashtag

Introduction

Instagram is a social media outlet with users made up of individuals, organizations, vendors, and businesses, which post their own photos and repost other photos to their followers. “Hashtags” are used as subjects for the post, providing a link to related posts with the same “hashtag.” Since its launch in October 2010, approximately 75 million daily users have shared 16 billion photos to date on Instagram [1]. Users are composed predominantly of an urban, youthful demographic group, with over 90% of the 150 million people on Instagram under the age of 35. In addition, women comprise 68% of users [2]. Seventy percent of users access it at least once a day and 35% use it multiple times per day [1]. With an average of 257 minutes per month spent using this form of social media, Instagram offers an interactive and engaging way to involve the public [1].

The presence of social media within the context of healthcare is well documented [3-8]. However, the literature is scant with regard to use of Instagram in the medical realm, especially in the context of dermatology. Thus we proposed the question, what dermatology-related content is available on Instagram? Our study aims to answer this question.

Methods

Data was collected by author JC on March 12, 2014. Instagram has two search mechanisms to identify users or subjects of interest, searching users or “hashtags.” The most popular professional dermatological organizations, dermatology journals, and dermatology related patient advocate groups on Twitter and Facebook identified by Amir et al were searched for on Instagram [9]. The organizations’ websites were investigated for a link to follow them on Instagram.

Users with *dermatology*, *dermatologist*, or terms related to dermatology (*alopecia*, *eczema*, *melanoma*, *psoriasis*, and *skin cancer*) in their name or profile were searched. In addition, “hashtags” related to dermatology were searched, for example *#dermatology*, *#dermatologist*, *#melanoma*, *#acne*, *#psoriasis*, *#alopecia*, and others.

Because searched users on Instagram cannot be filtered by popularity, a web interface, Quickagram, was used to determine the most popular users with the name *dermatology* in their name or profile. Once a dermatological professional organization was found on Instagram, its posts and followers were recorded and post content was examined. Also, their followers were searched for other sought-after users. Users found were investigated for their association with a practice or professional organization related to dermatology, and number of followers and posts. The number of posts with the above “hashtags” were recorded and the most recent 50 posts were scanned.

Results

None of the top ten dermatological journals or professional dermatological organizations on Twitter and Facebook as identified by another study were found on Instagram. Of the top ten patient advocate groups related to dermatology conditions, Melanoma Research Foundation (user name *@curemelanoma*) was the only organization on Instagram and had a total of 58 posts and 371 followers with the most recent post on March 10, 2014 (Figure 1). The content of their posts included pictures of promotional events, advertisements of future events, website promotion, sun protection, and early detection of skin cancer. Other patient advocate groups found on Instagram were Melanoma Foundation New England (user name *@melanomafdnne*) with 31 posts and 134 followers, last post one month prior to March 12, 2014. This group was found by searching Melanoma Research Foundation’s followers. Their content was similar to Melanoma Research Foundation’s, with pictures of their events and posts with links to their website promoting public awareness of melanoma. Additional users identified by our search that seek to promote public awareness regarding dermatological issues were: Tanning is Out by Canadian Cancer Society BC and Yukon (user name *@tanningisout*) with 62 posts and 95 followers, last post Mar 7 2014, and Alopecia Areata Awareness (user name *@AAAwareness*) with 1499 posts and 976 followers, last post >6 months ago. The Alopecia Areata Awareness group asks patients with alopecia to post themselves with the “AA hand sign.” All posts were pictures of patients with alopecia areata.

When searching users with *dermatology*, *dermatologist*, or other dermatological terms, the most common truly dermatology-related results were private offices and cosmetic products. Products related to dermatology found on Instagram included Obagi Medical Products ®, a popular brand sold in dermatology offices with acne and anti-aging regimens (user name *@obagimedical*), with 220 posts and 2464 followers, and Coppertone ® (user name *@coppertoneusa*), with 168 posts and 1721 followers. Both of these users post primarily photos of their products.

When searching “hashtags,” it is difficult to qualify results because “hashtags” are not standardized and cannot be filtered by relevance or popularity. The 50 newest posts under searched “hashtags” were scanned and included photos related to a user’s personal experience with or products related to the dermatological condition searched. Table 1 illustrates the number of posts related to nine dermatological terms.

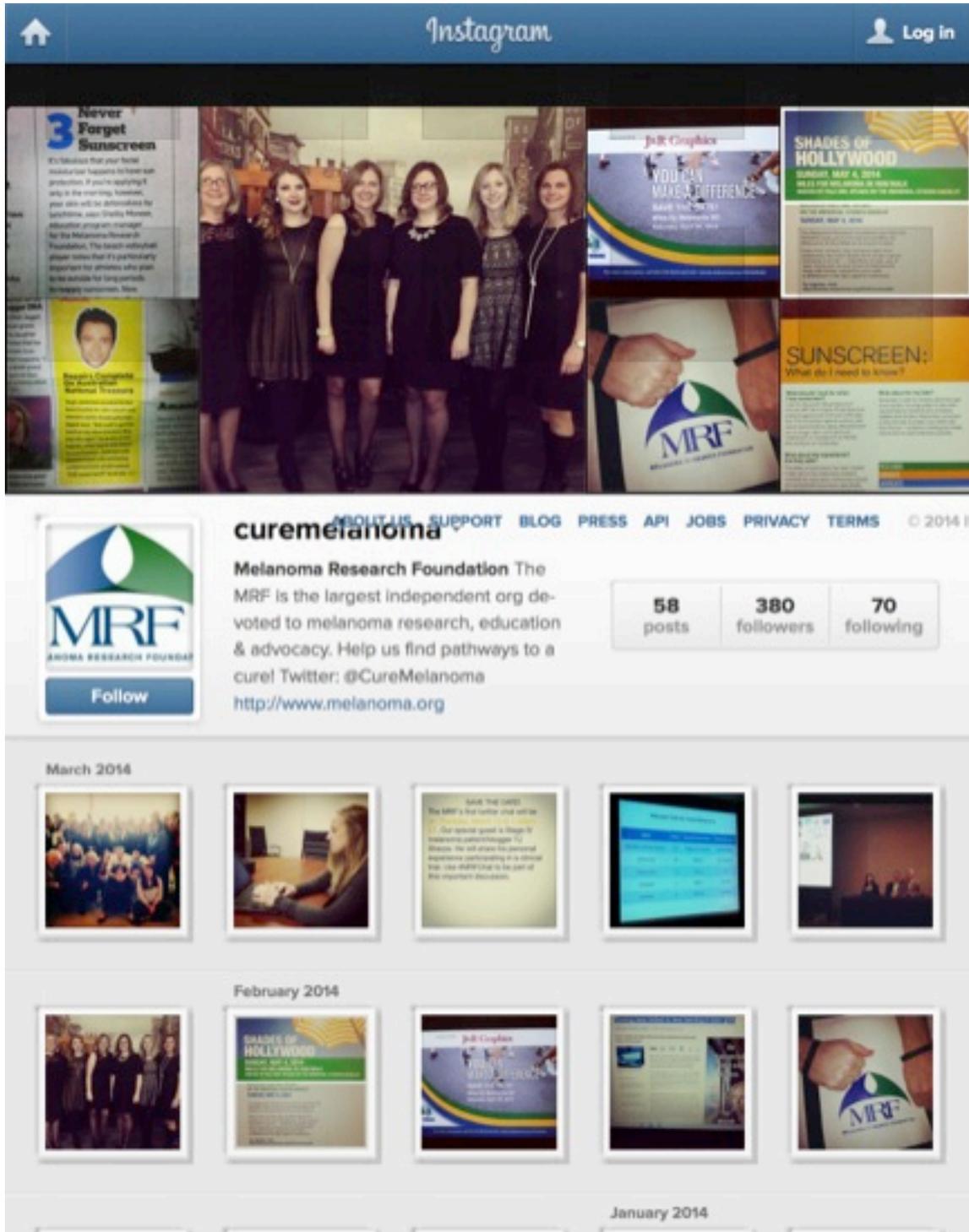


Figure 1. Example of user-interface for Instagram.

Table 1: Dermatology-related “hashtags” and number of posts on March 12, 2014

Hashtag	Number of posts
Skin	2,255,558
Acne	303,453

Eczema	22,998
Alopecia	21,471
Skin Cancer	16,292
Psoriasis	10,848
Accutane	10,673
Dermatologist	9,431
Melanoma	9,260

Discussion

Our results demonstrate that the dermatology user presence on Instagram is dominated by private offices, cosmetic products, and some patient advocacy groups. The top ten dermatology journals on Facebook and Twitter were notably lacking a presence on Instagram. In addition, there were a large number of hashtags related to dermatological conditions suggesting that users employ Instagram to post personal experiences with skin conditions. This novel social networking platform could grant dermatology journals and other professional organizations a unique opportunity to reach younger demographic populations, particularly women, with the potential for true educational and life-changing impact.

This opportunity has been realized by politicians, political groups, and advocacy campaigns. With almost 3 million followers and 176 posts, President Obama has used Instagram to document his campaign trails and continually inspire political following (First Lady Obama does not fall too far behind with almost 700,000 followers and 116 posts) [10]. Politicians across the country, both democratic and republican, utilize Instagram and other social networking websites to connect on a more personal level with audiences of potential voters [11]. In an attempt to appeal to the ‘everyday’ citizen, photos often depict political celebrities with their families and pets and show them participating in various hobbies. Instagram provides a transparent and functional platform to reach the masses. Perhaps now is the time for dermatology journals to take the lead in the academic medical community to jump on the photo-sharing bandwagon. After all, dermatology is undoubtedly a visual field and, when it comes down to it, a picture is worth a thousand words.

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