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Social media use in residency recruitment during the COVID-19 pandemic

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Abstract

To investigate the extent to which dermatology programs use social media to connect with applicants, we conducted a search of all 140 residency programs on Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. Our search revealed 74 (53%) Instagram, 21 (15%) Facebook, 20 (14%) Twitter, and four (3%) YouTube accounts for dermatology programs, with the number of Instagram accounts increasing five-fold from the end of 2019 to present. Our results demonstrate that conditions created during the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic accelerated dermatology residency programs' acceptance of social media, particularly Instagram, as a means to communicate and share information with applicants.

Keywords: dermatology, education, Facebook, Instagram, residency programs, social media, Twitter, YouTube

Introduction

Social media has emerged as a resource to recruit future residents by highlighting program strengths and showcasing residency culture and lifestyle. Prior studies suggest up to 60% of applicants were influenced by Doximity rankings in applying to dermatology programs [1], but the presence and impact of other social media platforms in the residency recruitment process remain to be explored. This study characterizes the engagement of dermatology residency programs on social media. We hypothesize that programs have increased utilization of social media to address gaps created by a virtual interview season.

Methods

All 140 dermatology programs in the 2021 United States Accreditation Council for Graduate Medical Education were queried on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube using both full names and abbreviations [2]. For each page with residency-related content, we recorded the number of likes (Facebook) or followers/subscribers (Instagram, Twitter, YouTube), and year of creation or of the first post. For YouTube, if programs did not have their own channel, we noted whether the greater institution's channel posted a program-specific video in 2020. Ten programs on Twitter and Instagram were chosen at random and their followers were categorized into the following demographics: medical student, resident/fellow, attending, dermatology program, and other, based on their public profile description (**Table 1**).

Results

Out of 140 dermatology residency programs, there were 74 (53%) Instagram, 21 (15%) Facebook, 20 (14%) Twitter, and four (3%) YouTube accounts (**Table 2**). On Instagram, 59 (80%) of 74 residency pages were created in 2020, 9 (12%) in 2019, four (5%) in 2018, one (1.4%) in 2016, and one (1.4%) in 2015. On Facebook, three (14%) of 21 dermatology residency pages were created in 2020. The number of Facebook accounts created every year since the first account in 2009 stayed between zero and three. Of 20 total dermatology residency accounts on Twitter, 8 (40%) accounts were created in 2020. The number of Twitter accounts created since the first account in 2012 stayed between zero and five.

Table 1. Follower demographic breakdown criteria.

Medical student	Resident/Fellow	Attending	Dermatology program	Other
Both U.S. and international medical students.	Resident or Fellow in any specialty.	Board-certified attending in any practice setting and specialty.	ACGME-accredited Dermatology Residency Programs.	Profile information insufficient to categorize.
	Includes M.D. research fellows.	Includes attendings practicing outside of the U.S.		Includes medical practices, non-dermatology residency programs, Ph.D. professors and fellows.

Across Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter, there were 70 new accounts created in 2020, 14 accounts created in 2019, 6 accounts in 2018, 6 accounts in 2017, four accounts in 2016, and 7 accounts in 2015. Before 2015, there were only one or two new social media accounts created each year. All YouTube accounts were created within the last year and 21 (15%) programs uploaded new content on their institution’s channel in 2020.

The mean breakdown of followers on Instagram was 10% medical students, 5.8% residents/fellows, 10% attendings, 8.5% dermatology programs, and 66% other. On Twitter, the mean breakdown of followers was 19% medical students, 9% residents/fellows, 15% attendings, 2% dermatology programs, and 55% other.

Discussion

Although dermatology programs have previously underutilized social media [2], over 50% of programs currently have an Instagram account as of 2020, suggesting that residency programs have embraced social media as a solution to the limitations of virtual interviews in the COVID-19 pandemic. Instagram was also the most utilized social media platform, congruent with prior studies indicating its popularity among dermatologists [3,4].

The content of posts differed across platforms. Instagram accounts focused on the life of residents, whereas posts on Twitter and Facebook featured more content regarding department-related events or research. Instagram’s image-based platform without a character limit for captions offers more opportunities for informal posts about lifestyle and culture, whereas Twitter and Facebook are more text-centered platforms, perhaps explaining the presence of more formal and academic content.

Twitter and Instagram received more engagement from medical students and attendings compared to residents/fellows and dermatology programs, though many Instagram followers could not be identified owing to their privacy settings. Because users post more informal, personal content on Instagram, it is understandable that medical students may not wish for their accounts to be identifiable to residency programs, as previous studies have showed some programs screen applicants on social media [5].

Conclusion

Our data reveal a disproportionate increase in social media use, particularly Instagram, by dermatology residency programs related to the pandemic. Future studies might consider assessing social media

Table 2. Annual count of dermatology residency programs that created new social media accounts.

	2020	2019	2018	2017	2016	2015	2014	2013	2012	2011	2010	2009
Instagram	59	9	4	0	1	1	/	/	/	/	/	/
Facebook	3	2	1	3	3	3	0	0	1	2	2	1
Twitter	8	3	1	3	0	3	1	0	1	/	/	/

engagement through cross-sectional surveys of applicants and programs [6].

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Potential conflicts of interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.