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Wyatt Boothby-Shoemaker

Henry Ford Health, wboothb1@hfhs.org

Rayva Khanna

Raveena Khanna

Amanda Milburn

Shikha Walia

See next page for additional authors

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Authors

Wyatt Boothby-Shoemaker, Rayva Khanna, Raveena Khanna, Amanda Milburn, Shikha Walia, and Richard H. Huggins

Social Media Platforms as a Resource for Vitiligo Support

Wyatt Boothby-Shoemaker BA,^{a,b} Rayva Khanna MD,^c Raveena Khanna BA,^d Amanda Milburn BS,^e

Shikha Walia BS,^f Richard H. Huggins MD^a

^aHenry Ford Health System Department of Dermatology, Detroit, MI

^bMichigan State University College of Human Medicine, East Lansing, MI

^cGeorgetown University School of Medicine, Washington DC

^dUniversity of Arizona, Phoenix, AZ

^eNew York Institute of Technology College of Osteopathic Medicine, Glen Head, NY

^fLake Erie College of Osteopathic Medicine, Bradenton, FL

INTRODUCTION

Social media use among dermatology patients is ubiquitous, with estimates of over 80% of patients using social media to learn about their dermatologic conditions.¹ Vitiligo is an autoimmune disease leading to depigmentation with an estimated prevalence of 0.5%–2% globally.² Vitiligo has been implicated in a decreased quality of life (QoL), particularly in females, individuals with darker complexions, and those from South Asian cultures.^{3,4} Connecting with others through social media has been identified as a potential source of psychosocial support for those with dermatologic conditions.⁵ Our study sought to characterize vitiligo social media content to better understand how social media may be used for social support and to determine differences in content between social media platforms. Specifically, we hypothesized that the most popular posts would contain themes of patient support and connectedness, and we projected more posts to feature individuals with skin of color (SOC).

We used the keywords “vitiligo” and “vitiligo support” on Facebook, Reddit, TikTok, Twitter, and YouTube to analyze the 25

most popular posts involving humans. Searches were performed during the week of November 8, 2020. Characterizations included the post theme, and assessment of Fitzpatrick skin type and gender expression of individuals featured in the post. Each post was grouped into 1 of 4 categories: Body Positivity/Empowerment, Anecdotal, Group Organization, or Treatments (including alternative treatments). Apparent Fitzpatrick skin types III–VI were documented as SOC populations.

Our results are reported in Table 1. We found that the most popular social media content represented the categories of Body Positivity/Empowerment (70%), followed by Anecdotes (14%), Group Organization (9%), and Treatment (7%). Facebook (72%), Reddit (84%), TikTok (96%), Twitter (40%), and YouTube (38%) represented more Body Positivity/Empowerment top posts, and Twitter appeared to be the most prominent forum for Group Organization purposes (20%). Information on treatments was more likely from Facebook (24%) and YouTube (12%), and YouTube represented more patient anecdotes (42%). All top social media posts were more likely to include SOC individuals (66%) and females (69%).

TABLE 1.

Summary of Social Media Content Containing #vitiligo and #vitiligosupport

Characterization of the Top 25 Posts With Images on Social Media Platforms Using #vitiligo #vitiligosupport						
Social Media Platform	Facebook	Reddit	TikTok	Twitter	YouTube	Average
Likes	800,000	4,700	1.7 million	50,000	550,000	620,490
Body Positivity/ Empowerment	Copy	Copy	Copy	Copy	Copy	Copy
Anecdotes	72%	84%	96%	40%	38%	70%
Group Organizations	0%	12%	4%	40%	42%	14%
Treatments	4%	0%	0%	20%	8%	9%
Total	24%	4%	0%	0%	12%	7%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
Skin of Color Representation (Fitzpatrick Skin Type III–VI)	96%	44%	56%	50%	84%	66%

Our analysis of popular vitiligo social media content demonstrate that Body Positivity/Empowerment posts were most common across all social media platforms. Physicians can direct patients with vitiligo to vitiligo-related social media content for encouragement, disease acceptance role modeling, outlets for story sharing, and/or information about vitiligo support organizations. Social media can also provide insight into real-time data on popular trends like alternative treatments, which can inform providers on potential discussions with vitiligo patients.

Lastly, we found a higher percentage of popular social media posts including female and people with darker skin types. Given that females and people with darker complexions experience disproportionately lower QoL from vitiligo, they may be more likely to engage in social media support.⁴ Clinicians and researchers seeking to communicate with these populations may want to consider use of social media in their outreach. Future studies should investigate whether individuals who participate and interact with vitiligo-related social media is associated with better QoL, and should further characterize social media content for dermatologic diseases disproportionately affecting patients with SOC. Limitations to this study include sample size.

DISCLOSURES

The authors report no relevant conflicts of interest or funding sources supporting this study.

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AUTHOR CORRESPONDENCE

Richard Huggins MD

E-mail:..... rhuggin1@hfhs.org