

Social Media as a Catalyst for Health Education and Early Diagnosis of Hidradenitis Suppurativa

Arsema K. Zadu MS,^a Ijenna Adibe,^b DanTasia Welch MS,^a Willow Pastard MS,^a Ellen N. Pritchett MD MPH,^a Candrice R. Heath MD,^a Ginette A. Okoye MD,^a Angel S. Byrd MD PhD^a

^aDepartment of Dermatology, Howard University College of Medicine, Washington, DC

^bHoward University, Washington, DC

INTRODUCTION

Social media, particularly TikTok, may play a transformative role in promoting earlier hidradenitis suppurativa (HS) symptom recognition. Anecdotal reports suggest more patients seek medical evaluation after learning about HS symptoms through TikTok, supporting research linking social media exposure to positive healthcare-seeking behaviors.¹

Over the past 70 years, health information distribution has transformed, driven by the internet. In the 1960s and 70s, physicians were the primary educators, with limited patient input in educational materials like brochures.² The 1980s introduced visual aids, while the 1990s saw the internet revolutionize access, enabling patients to research conditions and shift from paternalistic to collaborative care.^{2,3} Currently, nearly 80% of adults rely on the internet for health information, significantly broadening access and promoting inclusivity.⁴

Social media now plays a key role in disseminating health information and fostering healthcare communities. It offers real-time interaction, peer support, and amplifies patient voices. Platforms like TikTok, YouTube, Reddit, and others increase access, particularly for younger, low-income, and underrepresented groups.⁴ Social media can help narrow the health literacy gap with videos and infographics that improve patient comprehension.⁵ Online communities can provide emotional support and bridge gaps overlooked by traditional healthcare.⁶

According to one study, information gained online increased healthcare service usage, increased patients' foundational knowledge which helped them articulate concerns during visits, thereby improving visit efficiency.⁷

In 2024, TikTok had over 1 billion active users and an ad reach that impacts 17.9% of internet users aged 18+.⁸ This widespread influence may play a significant role in increasing awareness of HS. Patient-created videos, like one on double-ended pseudocomedones, engaged viewers who recognized their symptoms and realized they should see a doctor for a possible HS diagnosis.⁹ This highlights how social media fosters community and promotes early intervention.

The evolution of health education reflects a shift toward patient empowerment. People in low-income countries, older adults,

and those with less education face challenges in accessing the internet but have the most to gain from online health information.⁴ Social media platforms like TikTok democratize health education, encouraging early treatment-seeking behaviors, although the risk of possible misinformation must be acknowledged. As these platforms expand, their potential to transform public health, shared decision-making, and health literacy warrants further investigation.

DISCLOSURES

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AUTHOR CORRESPONDENCE

Arsema K. Zadu MS

E-mail:..... Arsema.zadu2@bison.howard.edu