

## Commentary

# “I’m Home(screen)!”: Social Media in Health Care Has Arrived

Laura T. Housman, MPH, MBA<sup>1,2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Access Solutions Consulting, Framingham, Massachusetts; and <sup>2</sup>Tufts School of Medicine, Boston, Massachusetts

### ABSTRACT

In more than a decade, the adoption and use of some type of social media among American adults has risen from 5% in 2005 to nearly 70% in 2016. The reigning social media platform by usage, Facebook, has 142% more American adult users than the second most utilized social media platform, Instagram, which was purchased by Facebook in March 2012. Of the 68% of American adult Facebook users, more than three quarters visit the site daily. Although social media applications (apps) such as Facebook and Instagram are the clear draw among users, health care apps are beginning to gain traction as well. In 2017, 32% of consumers now have at least 1 health app on their smartphones or tablets, doubling over the past 4 years. Although having an app should not be confused with using an app, having an app downloaded and available for use is a step closer to ongoing adoption. Mobile apps in health care are being used for ordering and scheduling health care services, as well as tracking and managing aspects of health and wellness. An incredible opportunity now exists to connect and leverage social media to enhance the impact of health care, particularly in the areas of drug development, clinical trial recruitment, and therapy administration and adherence, in which dose reminders, sharing of side effects and response, and the accessibility of patients to one another has both a context and a platform. This commentary serves as an introduction to the ways that social media and mobile health care apps are being used in real-world settings as tools to advance the development and effectiveness of clinical therapeutics. (*Clin Ther.* 2017;■:■■■-■■■) © 2017 Elsevier HS Journals, Inc. All rights reserved.

**Key words:** Social media, digital health, drug development, clinical trials, online communities, smartphone applications.

### INTRODUCTION

With the near-universal ownership of smartphones and tablets in advanced countries, the rising availability in emerging economies and almost ubiquitous usage of social media applications (apps) on those technologies, the ability to continuously and readily measure, influence, and change health care is within reach more now than ever before. Social media usage among American adults has risen from 5% in 2005 to nearly 70% in 2016, with the application Facebook having more than 142% more American adult users than Instagram. With more than 75% of American adult users of Facebook visiting daily, there is a clear draw among users. Moreover, in 2017 32% of consumers have at least 1 health app on their smartphones or tablets. Those reporting Internet usage or smartphone ownership in a 2015 Pew Research Center survey was a median of 87% across 11 advanced economies, including the United States and Canada, major Western European nations, developed Pacific nations (Australia, Japan, and South Korea), and Israel. A median usage or ownership of 54% was reported for developing countries such as Malaysia, Brazil, and China.<sup>1</sup> In 2017, ~70% of Americans use social media in an effort to connect with one another; to share thoughts, information, and news; and to learn, explore new topics, and entertain themselves.<sup>2</sup>

Although social media apps, such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, are the clear draw among users, mobile health care apps are beginning to gain traction as well. Mobile apps in health care are

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seeking to address a number of categories of health management, either discretely or across multiple areas within 1 app. These apps can be geared toward physicians and clinicians, to patients, or to both groups as a way to enhance communications and engagement. There are apps that support self-directed health education and research into a particular condition, such as WebMD; measuring, monitoring, and tracking of physiology, such as Azumio, maker of Cardio Buddy and Sleep Time; medication dosage reminders and management, such as MediSafe and PillPack; and connecting physicians and nurses with patients, such as Pager and Patient IO. Although there is a range of app categories, the majority of mobile health care apps are currently associated with wellness, such as tracking calories, steps taken, and sleep rates via smartphone and wristband devices.<sup>3</sup>

### **SOCIAL MEDIA AND MOBILE HEALTH CARE APP INNOVATIONS FOR DISEASE TREATMENT AND MONITORING**

Disease and treatment apps with a singular focus on a particular therapeutic area, despite comprising a relatively small proportion of health apps in the marketplace, have been at the center of innovative medication treatment and monitoring programs over the past several years. Such apps may aid patients with chronic illnesses such as diabetes and cardiovascular disease, for which self-management is impactful on healthy eating, being physically active, monitoring vital signs, taking medications, and generally adhering to good disease management techniques.

The Trulicity App is 1 example of patient engagement through an innovative treatment online app. In September 2016, Eli Lilly and Company introduced a multifaceted mobile app with call/instant message support to engage patients with type 2 diabetes who use Trulicity (dulaglutide), the company's once-weekly injectable diabetes medication. The 2 main goals of the app and instant message support functionality are to ensure correct usage of the Trulicity Pen and to improve adherence. To achieve these goals, Lilly incorporated a virtual demonstration of the Trulicity Pen in its app that walks patients through every aspect of the device, including sound. Weekly reminders for dosing and tracking of time between doses help keep patients engaged and adherent, while assistance is a tap or call away via the Lilly Answer Center.<sup>4</sup>

The Lilly Trulicity app can also serve as a basis of commonality for discussion and engagement among the broader Trulicity patient community via social media forums. These forums are created by patients, are separate from the company-sponsored app, and can serve as a support to patients who are also accustomed to using mobile technology, such as the Trulicity smartphone app. An example of this type of engagement can be found on the American Diabetes Association Support Community website (community.diabetes.org), where one can find a number of online communities started by patients. Some of these online communities discuss user experiences with Trulicity, such as the community forum "Introduction and Trulicity Thoughts" (community.diabetes.org; search term "Introduction and Trulicity Thoughts").

This type of social media and mobile engagement is expected to benefit both Trulicity-treated patients and Lilly. Beyond the expected improvements in adherence and device usability, sharing experiences with one another via the app can be a powerful way to encourage authentic insight gathering among patients. Such community engagement may result in greater usage of the app and, ultimately, a better treatment experience for patients who use Trulicity. Although pharmaceutical companies continue to incorporate mobile health app components into their drug adherence programs, the need remains to study and publish the impact on adherence, and ultimately health outcomes, from their usage.

### **TEXT AND TELL: SHARING HEALTH CARE EXPERIENCES THROUGH ONLINE COMMUNITIES**

"Online community" is the updated social media term for what was previously known from sociology as "reference groups." In a definition >60 years old, "reference groups are commonly defined as individuals or collectives that serve as a point of comparison (or reference) to a given individual in the constitution of its values, attitudes, or behaviors, thus influencing the individual's choices, behaviors, and attitudes."<sup>5</sup> A unique aspect of the online community, as explored by Scaraboto et al,<sup>6</sup> is that all communication is via text. Nuances of tone, intent, and meaning, detectable in speech, are missing in text-only communication. In addition, it would be useful to further research and explore whether individuals posting to online

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