

Scoliosis and the Social Media: Facebook as a Means of Information Exchange

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Abstract

Background Context: Over the last decade, the emergence of social networking websites such as Facebook have revolutionized information dissemination and broadened opportunities to engage in discussions. In particular, having been widely adopted in the younger generation, the use of this medium has become more prevalent in health disorders such as scoliosis in the adolescent population. However, the quality of information on Facebook is unregulated and variable, which may mislead patients in their decision making.

Purpose: To document the various types of information available and assess the quality of information on Facebook discussion boards using recognized scoring systems.

Study Design: To evaluate the quality of information on the social network.

Patient Sample: A search for the keyword “scoliosis” on Facebook was performed and the first 100 pages generated were reviewed.

Outcomes Measured: SCSS and DISCERN score.

Methods: Content analysis was performed on discussion boards and personal blogs. Two independent examiners evaluated each site according to scoliosis-specific content score (SCSS) and the DISCERN criteria, both previously used instruments to judge the quality of information on the Internet pertaining to scoliosis. The SCSS range from 0 to 32 (higher score better) and the DISCERN 16 to 80 (higher score better).

Results: Of the 100 sites reviewed, 33 were discussion boards and personal blogs. Of these, the overall average SCSS was 5.7 (SD 5.8, range 0–20) and the DISCERN was 22.5 (SD 7.6, range 16–45), indicating that using general scoring systems the quality of information provided was overall poor.

Conclusion: Using recognized scoring systems to analyze Facebook pages used as discussion forums or blogs, we showed that the quality in general was poor. For modern practices to adapt to an era of information exchange via the social network, the orthopedic community should develop ways to incorporate the social media in future patient education.

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Keywords: Scoliosis; Social media; Facebook; DISCERN; Scoliosis-specific content score

Introduction

Over the last decade, there has been an expansion of health-related information on the Internet. A recent report revealed that 95% of teenagers use the Internet, and 81% of them use social media sites [1]. The emergence of social networking websites such as Facebook [2] has

revolutionized information dissemination as well as inter-personal communication. A single report has highlighted the frequency of use of social networking sites such as Facebook as an information source for orthopedic outpatients [3].

Facebook was created at Harvard University in 2004 as a tool for college students to identify students from other residential halls [4]. Since its launch, it has grown significantly, with an average of 890 million active users on a daily basis [5]. In contrast to earlier static health-related websites, Facebook creates a platform for a dynamic exchange of information and has taken over as an important avenue for the layperson to gather information on their medical problems.

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In particular, having been widely adopted in the younger demographic group, the use of this medium has become more prevalent in disorders of adolescent population [6]. Scoliosis, a common spinal disorder in children and adolescents, is a perfect example of this [7].

The emergence of peer-to-peer interaction via Internet support groups may help guide patients to critically appraise their treatment options [8]. However, with the exponential growth in health-related information available on Facebook and the lack of quality control, this information may quickly become unregulated and variable, which may mislead patients in their decision making. It is, therefore, important for doctors to be aware of the information available to their patients to minimize patient misunderstanding regarding their medical condition [9]. In addition, as the social network becomes more integrated in medicine, it is important to grasp an understanding of how this method of information sharing can be augmented, or manipulated, to make it an efficacious tool in healthcare.

Previous studies have demonstrated the inadequacy and questionable reliability of Web-based health information [10-13]. However, the limited literature regarding the use of social media in medical education, and particularly scoliosis, allied to the widespread popularity of Facebook in the adolescent population, strongly indicates that this medium warrants further investigation. The objectives of this study were (1) to document the various types of information available pertaining to scoliosis and (2) to assess the quality of information on Facebook discussion boards and personal blogs using recognized scoring systems.

Methods

A search for the keyword “scoliosis” on Facebook [2] on February 15, 2015, generated 1062 pages. The first 100 pages were reviewed [8,14-17]. Fourteen were excluded because of inaccessibility, non-English pages and duplication. The remaining 86 pages were independently examined by the first two authors (J. P. N. and N. T.). Demographic details including age and sex distribution were extracted from the first 10 posts from each page. The Facebook pages were categorized into educational, discussion boards, personal blogs, commercial, non-physician-provider (allied health professionals—physiotherapist, occupational therapist, and alternative medical providers), and physician-provider.

Content analysis using the scoliosis-specific content score (SCSS) and the DISCERN instrument were employed to examine the quality of information within postings to the pages in the discussion board and personal blog categories [17,18]. Only discussion boards and personal blogs were chosen for analysis as the ability to share information on a personal level is the unique feature of the social network.

The DISCERN instrument is a validated and reliable tool to judge the quality of written consumer health information. Section 1 (8 questions) scrutinizes the reliability of the information, Section 2 (7 questions) addresses the specifics of treatment options, and the last question is the overall impression of the website [13]. On a scale from 1 to 5, a score of 5 is a definite “yes” and a score of 1 is a definite “no” to each question (Table 1).

The SCSS was previously described by Mathur et al. in 2005 [17]. The information presented on each site was reviewed and the content explored for 35 scoliosis-specific words that help with disease summary, classification, treatment options, and complications related to observation or surgical management. On an ordinal scale with a maximum of 32 points, each website was awarded a point for mentioning each scoliosis-specific term (Table 2).

Lastly, the first 10 posts from each of the discussion boards and personal blogs were also scrutinized for the purpose of post and evidence of social support. The purpose of post was categorized as follows: (1) Relate personal experience; (2) Seek explicit query; (3) Offer explicit advice; (4) Group stimulation; and (5) Irrelevant comment

Table 1
DISCERN: an instrument for judging the quality of written consumer health information on treatment choices.

DISCERN criterion	Questions
Section 1: Reliability of publication	1. Are the aims clear? 2. Does it achieve its aims? 3. Is it relevant? 4. Is it clear what sources of information were used to compile the publication (other than the author or producer)? 5. Is it clear when the information used or reported in the publication was produced? 6. Is it balanced and unbiased? 7. Does it provide details of additional sources of support and information? 8. Does it refer to areas of uncertainty?
Section 2: Quality of information on treatment choices	9. Does it describe how each treatment works? 10. Does it describe the benefits of each treatment? 11. Does it describe the risks of each treatment? 12. Does it describe what would happen if no treatment is used? 13. Does it describe how the treatment choices affect the overall quality of life? 14. Is it clear that there may be more than one possible treatment choice? 15. Does it provide support for shared decision making?
Section 3: Overall rating of the publication	16. Based on the answers to all of the above questions, rate the overall quality of the publication as a source of information about treatment choices

Note: On a scale from 1 to 5, a score of 5 is a definite “yes” and a score of 1 is a definite “no” to each question. Score tabulated and presented out of 80 (16 being lowest).

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