

Patient Perceptions of Social Media Use by Orthopaedic Surgeons:

Comparing Responses Across the United States



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Introduction

The majority of American adults use social media (SM) daily ¹ and utilization of various social networking platforms among orthopedic surgery patients continues to rise ^{2,5}. Surgeon social media presence has seen a notable increase as well ⁵. It has been established that social media presence is correlated with higher online ratings ^{2,3}, while increasing patient engagement, exposure, and education without added costs ^{4,6}.

A recent pilot study conducted by our group at the University of Colorado identified high SM usage trends for healthcare information, and detailed how patients perceive SM content by orthopedic surgeons. This study helped assess optimal methods of patient engagement among orthopedic surgeons, but larger studies across multiple regions/institutions are still lacking, thus making the findings less generalizable to patient populations.

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to characterize content posted by orthopedic surgeons on social media while investigating patient perceptions of this content from various institutions across different regions of the United States. We analyzed how this content may influence respondents' healthcare decisions.

Methods

Social media posts by orthopedic surgeons from around the country were reviewed and categorized. A patient survey was written to assess perception of these categories and level of patient social media utilization. The survey was administered in the clinics of thirteen separate orthopedic surgeons with different levels of social media utilization via QR code. Survey results were analyzed for differences in utilization based on the physician the patient saw and between patients of different ages. Patient responses were assessed using response median to judge content types that were perceived positively, neutrally, or negatively, and interquartile range to judge whether responses were polarized or more consistent across the groups.

Table 1. Patient Social Media Utilization

62.2% everyday user
8.9% every week user
10.1% every month user
5.3% several times per year user
13.5% never user

Figure 1. Patient Demographics By Age

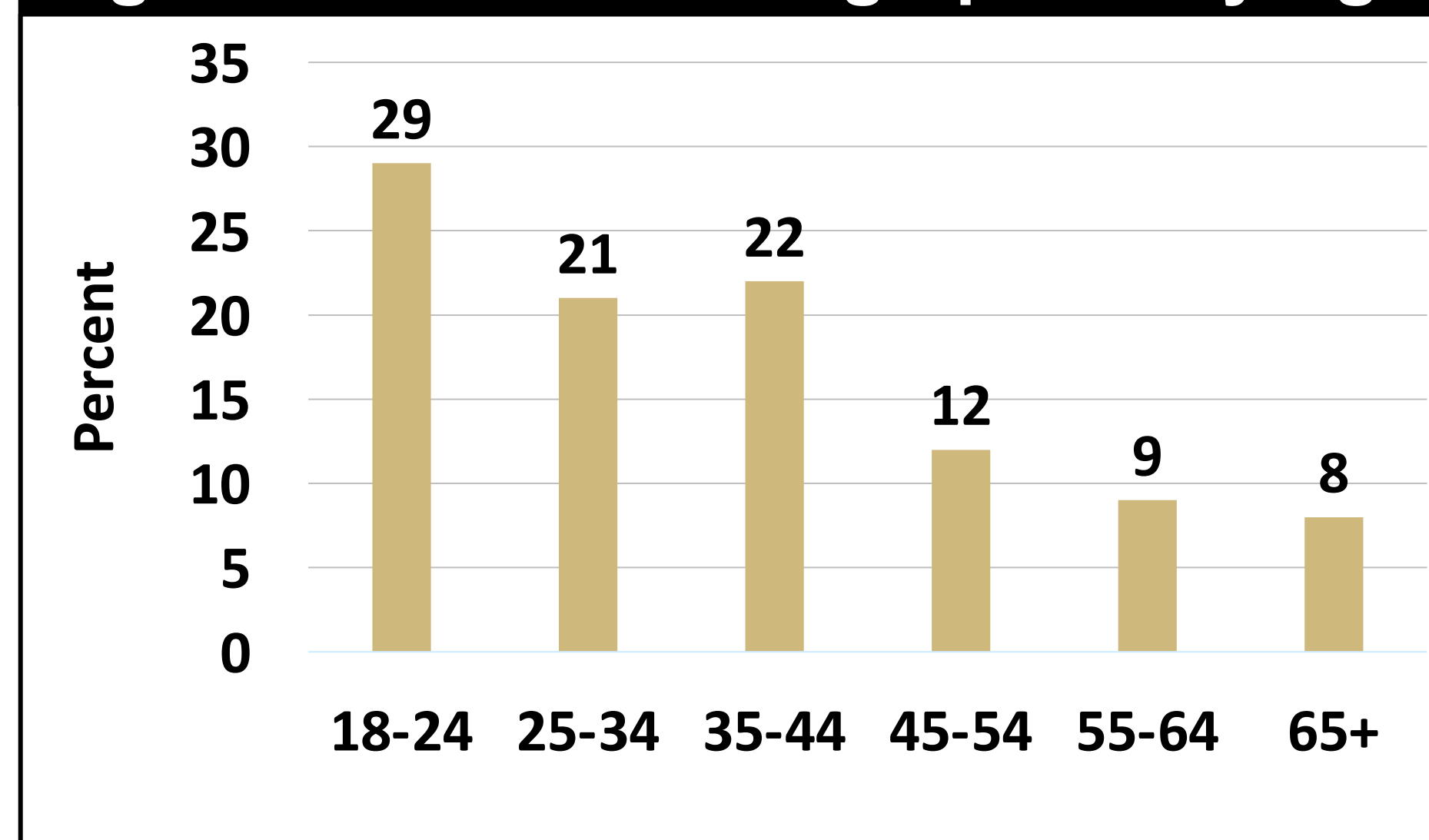


Figure 2. Social Media Utilization for Healthcare Information

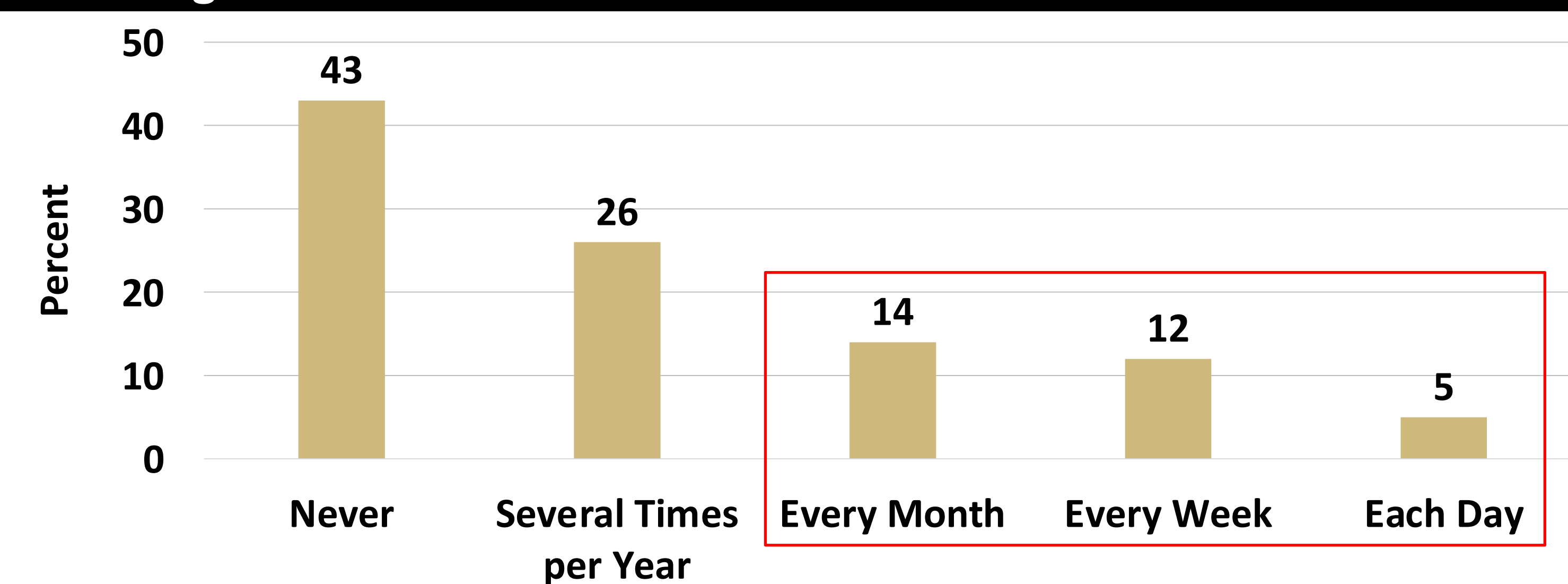


Figure 3. Likelihood of Social Media to Influence the Physician Seen

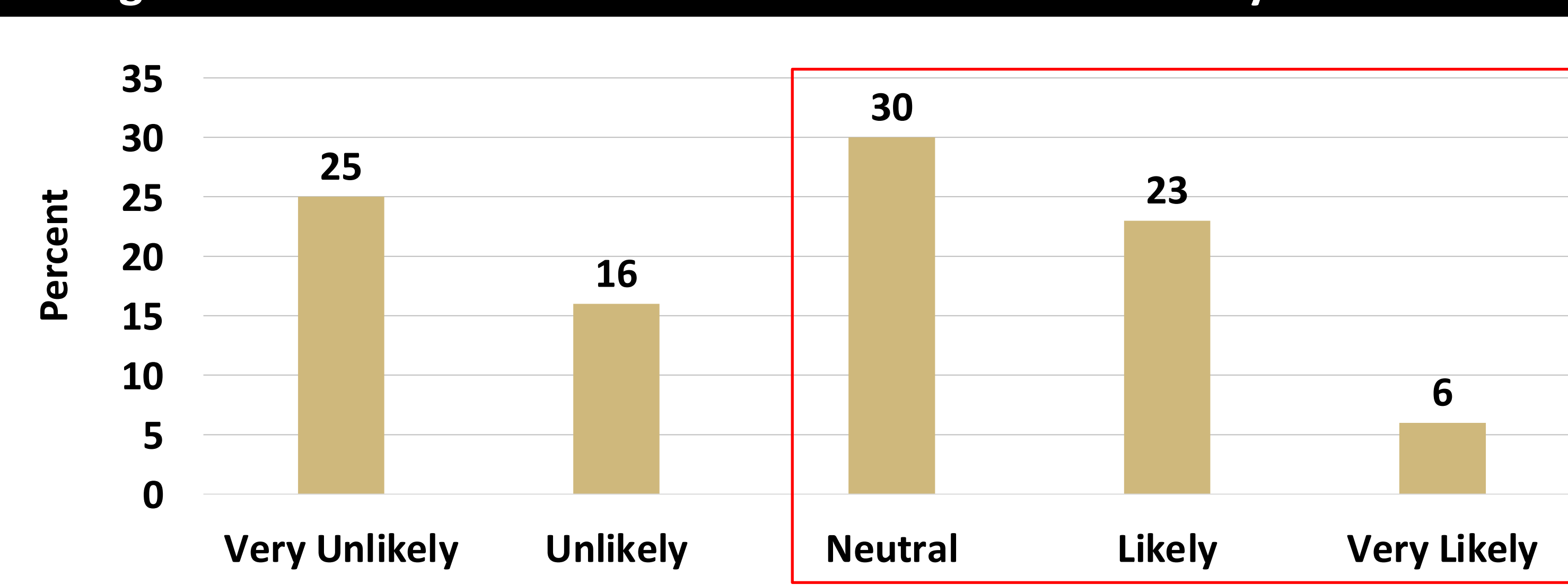


Table 2. Consistently Positive Posts

Educating patients
Displaying sports team coverage
Providing patient testimonials
(median: 4 – agree / IQR - 1)

Table 3. Consistently Neutral Posts

Educating colleagues
Academic presentations
Personal life
Case-based imaging
Support for diversity/marginalized groups
(median 3 – neither agree nor disagree / IQR – 1)

Table 4. Polarizing Topics

Research publications
Surgical technique pictures/videos
Pictures/videos within an operation
Pictures from the patient's own surgery
(each with IQR – 2)

Table 5. Negative & Polarizing Topics

Political statements
(median 4 – agree with negative in this case / IQR – 2)

Results

There were 636 completed patient surveys. In terms of social media utilization, the 18-24 (89.3%) and 25-34 (87.6%) age groups more likely to report daily use (p=0.002). However, social media utilization was high among all age groups with 71% of all patients and at least 60.1% of patients in each age group reporting weekly or daily usage. 31% of patients reported using social media to see information about their healthcare at least once per month, 44% of patients reported reviewing the social media account of a physician at least a few times a year, and 26% of patients reported that they were likely or very likely to view the social media account of their own physician. 29% of patients reported that social media content is likely or very likely to influence which physician they see, while only 6% of patients considered a large social media following important or very important. Patients held the most consistently positive view of posts educating patients, discussing sports team coverage, and providing patient testimonials. Several post categories elicited negative or highly polarized responses including those discussing research publications, showing surgical technique pictures/videos, showing pictures or videos taken of the surgeon in the operating room, political statements, or showing pictures from a patient's own surgery.

Discussion

To our knowledge, we report the first generalizable report regarding patient perceptions of social media created by physicians. SM is a useful tool to help physicians interact with patients and may be a helpful tool to those attempting to grow a practice. Physicians who wish to effectively interact with patients should consider posting content that is viewed most positively by patients including posts educating patients, discussing sports team coverage, and providing patient testimonials. Content that is viewed less favorably should be posted sparingly or with a sensitive tag so that patients can avoid seeing posts that they may not enjoy. Further study is required to understand the differences between physician social media content focused on interacting with patients compared to content focused on interacting with other physicians.

Conclusion

More than ever, patients are utilizing many means of engagement with their physicians – including social media. In order to best maximize patient outreach, education, and satisfaction, it is wise to understand the patient demographic's utilization habits and preferences regarding physician social media presence.

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