A Two-Year Educational Initiative to Teach Rheumatology through Social Media: The Rheumatology Image of the Week Project (#RheumIOW)

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Background

- With 2 billion global active monthly users of Facebook and 330 million users of Twitter, social media platforms may be used to deliver educational content to today’s adult learner.
- In graduate medical education (GME), social media has been used to engage learners and enhance education, most commonly using Twitter, podcasts, and blogs (1).
- The Rheumatology Image of the Week project (#RheumIOW) sought to leverage social media to disseminate educational micro-content about rheumatology.
- Rheumatology Fellows-In-Training (FITs) were recruited to generate questions based on the ACR Image Library, which were then shared online.
- We previously showed FITs found question-generation to be a valuable educational experience and useful for learning rheumatology (2).
- In the present analysis, we explore the engagement of social media users across three platforms with #RheumIOW content during the two years of the project.

Methods

- FITs created questions related to images from the ACR Image Library.
- Every Tuesday from August 2015-August 2017, one question, its accompanying image, and a link to the Image Library were shared via ACR accounts on Twitter, Facebook, and LinkedIn (Figure 1).
- Online engagement was measured using platform analytics, with Likes, Clicks, Retweets, Shares, Link Clicks, Post Clicks included as metrics of engagement.

Results

- As of May 2018, ACR accounts on Twitter, Facebook and LinkedIn had 15,800, 18,900, and 3,600 followers, respectively.
- #RheumIOW posts on Facebook generated >7,000 more clicks than on Twitter and >10,000 more clicks than on LinkedIn (Figure 2).
- #RheumIOW were some of the most popular posts sent from ACR accounts during this time, including the post that generated the most engagement in LinkedIn and Facebook during 2015-2017.
- There was a trend toward decreasing participation across all platforms over time, with a decline in likes of 40% in Facebook, 59% in Twitter, and 22% in LinkedIn between the first and last six months of the project (Figure 3).

Conclusions

The #RheumIOW project sought to leverage social media to deliver educational micro-content on rheumatology topics. While we previously showed that FITs found the creation of this content a great educational experience (2), our current analysis suggests that we were also successful in engaging other social media users to learn rheumatology. #RheumIOW posts were among the posts that generated the most engagement with users during the two years of the project.

Although ACR has similar numbers of followers on Twitter and Facebook, the latter generated 1.9 times more #RheumIOW Clicks. Facebook outperformed Twitter and LinkedIn in stimulating engagement with learners, an observation which may help guide future educational projects seeking to harness social media. This result is of particular interest given that current literature shows Twitter surpassing other social media platforms in the medical education arena (1). However, the decline in participation over time may indicate that future educational interventions are most effective when limited in duration.

Given the expected future shortage of rheumatologists in the workforce (3), educational outreach projects on social media may help to increase interest in rheumatology and could be used to recruit Millennials into the field. We previously showed that #RheumIOW also increased utilization of the ACR Image Library (2), encouraging public access to this curated resource of rheumatology information. Many GME training programs are similarly developing a social media presence in part to recruit trainees (1).

Although we showed great engagement with the #RheumIOW project, we could not evaluate whether our intervention caused an increase in rheumatology knowledge or heightened interest in the field. Prior studies have similarly argued that despite a robust uptake of social media platforms as forums for open-learning, the effect of these resources on learning remains largely unknown (4). More investigation is needed to understand and measure how current and emerging platforms perform in a rapidly changing technological landscape, and how to target and hold the attention of the desired audience.

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References