

Social Media Use and Dermatology Consultation-seeking Behavior among Filipino Adults: A Descriptive Cross-sectional Study

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Abstract

Background: Social media platforms have become ubiquitous online tools, fundamentally altering how individuals connect, share information, and interact with the healthcare system. Given the inherently visual nature of skin conditions, the quest for dermatologic information has surged in parallel with the exponential growth of social media over the past decade.

Objectives: This study aimed to characterize Filipino adults who seek dermatology-related health information on social media and to investigate how this information influences their behavior regarding skin, hair, and nail problems.

Materials and Methods: A descriptive cross-sectional study was conducted in December 2022 using nonprobability, purposive sampling. Data were collected via a validated 16-item online questionnaire distributed across various social media platforms, including Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. Descriptive statistics were computed from Google Form Responses, saved as a Microsoft Excel sheet.

Results: A total of 263 individuals participated in the online survey. The majority of Filipino adult social media users in this study were female (60.5%), single (92%), possessed high educational attainment (53.6% postgraduate degrees), and belonged to the middle-class income bracket (54%). Facebook was identified as the most commonly used social media platform (94.3%). A substantial proportion, approximately 87.5% (230/263), reported using social media to search for health information pertaining to the skin, hair, and/or nails. Crucially, most of these individuals (80.6%) verified the credibility of the information they received. The information gleaned from social media significantly influenced the majority of respondents (74.1%), with reported changes including starting (52.5%), changing (36.5%), and stopping (20.2%) treatment after seeking dermatology-related health information online. More than half of the respondents (51%) subsequently sought consultation with a board-certified dermatologist.

Conclusion: To the investigators' knowledge, this is the inaugural local descriptive study exploring the characteristics of Filipino patients who leverage social media as a health information tool for dermatologic concerns. The study provides crucial baseline information on how this digital engagement impacts their perception of disease, influences decisions to seek further evaluation and management, and alters treatment compliance. These findings are poised to significantly benefit both patients and healthcare providers in the Philippines.

Keywords: Dermatology, health information, health-seeking behavior, social media

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Submitted: 07-06-2025, **Revised:** 20-09-2025, **Accepted:** 18-10-2025, **Published:** 20-12-2025.

Access this article online

Quick Response Code:



Website:

<https://journals.lww.com/jpds>

DOI:

10.4103/JPDS.JPDS_26_25

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How to cite this article: Agbon RJ, Leuenberger MP. Social media use and dermatology consultation-seeking behavior among Filipino adults: A descriptive cross-sectional study. J Philipp Dermatol Soc 2025;34:55-60.

INTRODUCTION

The Internet, with its unparalleled ease of access, immediacy, and interactive nature, has become a predominant source of health information globally. In a study by Zhao and Zhang (2017), it was shown that the Internet, publications (e.g. books, magazines, and newspapers), and interpersonal sources (e.g. friends and relatives) have become main information sources for consumers seeking health information.^[1] Moreover, searching online has increased two-fold from 2001 to 2010 and has grown into a significant source of information. It has also been recognized that seeking health information plays an increasingly important role in users' online activities.^[2]

This trend toward Internet-based health information seeking is particularly pronounced in dermatology, where social media networks like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok serve as powerful platforms for patient education and knowledge dissemination. The growing integration of social media into medicine, especially dermatology, has fundamentally reshaped patient interactions with the healthcare system.^[3] The Philippines stands out as one of the countries with the highest rates of frequent online health information searching.^[2] Anecdotal reports from dermatology outpatient clinics highlight an increasing number of patients adopting products or altering skincare routines based on online content. This underscores the need to understand how social media influences Filipinos' behaviors concerning their skin, hair, and nail health.

The Philippines holds the distinction of being the “social media capital of the world,” with 89 million active social media users in 2021.^[4] Filipinos spend an average of 4 h and 15 min daily on social media, marking a consistent leading position globally for 6 consecutive years.^[5] As of January 2022, there were 92.05 million social media users in the Philippines, representing 82.4% of the total population, with Facebook, YouTube, TikTok, Instagram, Snapchat, and Twitter being the top platforms.^[6] Despite this widespread usage, comprehensive data on the demographic characteristics of dermatology patients and their attitudes toward medical information on social media remain scarce.

Assessing the impact of social media on how Filipinos manage their dermatologic health is essential.^[7] It is crucial to examine whether patients start, alter, or stop medications based on social media insights and if they seek professional dermatological consultation afterward. Social media has also been shown to play a crucial role in health information dissemination and public engagement during times of crisis

and uncertainty.^[8] During the COVID-19 pandemic, for example, individuals increasingly relied on online sources for health information for themselves and their families. This is not a new phenomenon; social media has been used for health communication and disease surveillance during other public health emergencies. It has also provided emotional support and helped build community resilience during these times.^[8]

A 2016 survey of smartphone users across 10 Asian countries revealed that a significant proportion of individuals in emerging nations like Indonesia (85%), Vietnam (86%), the Philippines (80%), and China (79%) frequently search for health information online.^[2] Undeniably, online health information has become a key enabler for improving, maintaining, and recovering health.

Social media has also transformed the dynamics between physicians and patients in health care. This is particularly evident in dermatology due to the visual nature of skin conditions.^[3] Many dermatologists have emerged as “influencers,” leveraging their extensive social media following and reach. Their posts often cover cosmetic procedures, skin diseases, and treatments. Educational content by dermatologists on platforms like Instagram, YouTube, and Twitter consistently garners the highest engagement, demonstrating their capacity to influence patient health-related behavior through accurate and informative dissemination.^[9]

Both doctors and patients actively use social media to exchange knowledge about medical conditions. For example, a study on acne treatment revealed that 45% of individuals consulted social media for advice, with YouTube and Instagram being the most popular platforms (58%). While many tried over-the-counter treatments (81%) or dietary modifications (40%), only 31% of social media users made changes fully aligned with clinical guidelines. However, the study also found that 68% of respondents who used social media for acne advice were more likely to consult a medical professional. The limited reported improvement in acne (7%) among social media users may be attributed to the lower accuracy of content compared to other healthcare sources.^[10]

Similarly, a study on Facebook as a source of disease-related information for psoriasis patients highlighted its benefits and risks. Most participants (75%) used Facebook monthly, and 72% of those used it specifically for skin disease information. Active members of psoriasis-related groups reported that the platform helped them cope, but concerns about unreliable information (60%) and aggressive sales

promotions (57%) were also noted. This suggests that while social media offers accessibility and support, it also poses risks of misinformation, reinforcing the need for validated content from healthcare professionals.^[11]

Beyond connecting with physicians, social media enables peer-to-peer support among individuals with similar medical conditions. Access to educational content, direct communication with healthcare providers, and interaction with patient organizations can deepen patients' understanding of their skin diseases.^[12] Thus, social media holds significant potential to shape perceptions, self-care practices, and decisions to seek professional management.

Despite these global insights, there remains a lack of local studies in the Philippines examining how social media influences dermatology-related health-seeking behavior. This study specifically aimed to determine how Filipino adults use social media for dermatology-related health information and to assess its impact on their treatment decisions and consultation-seeking with board-certified dermatologists.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The inclusion criteria for this descriptive cross-sectional study conducted in December 2022 were that participants had to be Filipinos aged 18 years or older who used at least one social media application at least once a week. Participants also had to agree to and submit the Informed Consent Form to be included in the study. The exclusion criteria for the study were participants with incomplete survey forms.

The calculated sample size was 246, based on an assumed 80% prevalence of searching health information online, a 5% maximum allowable error, and 95% confidence.^[3] Participants were selected using nonprobability purposive sampling. The study questionnaire was disseminated and shared online across Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram.

Recruitment was primarily conducted by posting the survey link on the principal investigator's personal social media platforms (Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram), which had an estimated combined reach of approximately 9000 followers. All interested individuals who met the inclusion criteria were able to access the link and answer the online questionnaire. Seven days were allotted for the formal survey to allow an ample number of participants, and the electronic link was reposted after 1 week to increase reach and satisfy the needed sample size. Because recruitment

relied heavily on the investigator's personal social networks, the sample may reflect the characteristics of those networks, introducing the possibility of selection bias.

Data collection was facilitated through an online questionnaire via Google Forms. Prior to accessing the main questionnaire, participants were required to agree to an informed consent. Both the informed consent form and the questionnaire were available in English and Filipino (Tagalog). The questionnaire was first validated by a third-party Filipino adult who was an active social media user for more than 5 years and knowledgeable in health information consumption. It was translated into Filipino (Tagalog) by a Filipino physician and back-translated into English by a Filipino-English teacher to ensure accuracy. The translated version was then pretested and modified accordingly before administration to participants. The questionnaire, a modified version of a previously validated instrument by Iftikhar and Abaalkhail (2017),^[7] comprised 16 questions divided into two parts: Part I (demographic data, 6 questions) and Part II (social media usage, 10 questions). Descriptive statistics were computed using Google Form Responses, which were saved as a Microsoft Excel sheet Version 16.65 (22091101).

This study complied with the ethical principles of the Declaration of Helsinki (2013) and the International Conference on Harmonization–Good Clinical Practice (ICH-GCP). The study protocol, informed consent form, and all relevant documents were reviewed and approved by the St. Luke's Medical Center Institutional Ethics Review Committee. All participants provided electronic informed consent before answering the survey. To protect anonymity, no identifying information was collected; each questionnaire was coded and securely stored in an external hard drive accessible only to the investigators. Study data will be retained in strict confidentiality for at least 5 years and destroyed thereafter. No financial incentives or expenses were involved in participation.

RESULTS

A total of 263 participants completed the online questionnaire. All respondents were adults, with an age range of 18–62 years and a mean age of 28.9 years. Table 1 presents the demographic profile of the respondents by sex, marital status, educational attainment, and average monthly income.

The majority of respondents were female (60.5%) and single (92.0%). A significant proportion (53.6%) held

Table 1: Demographic characteristics of the study participants (n=263)

Characteristic	n (%)
Sex	
Female	159 (60.5)
Male	101 (38.4)
Rather not say	3 (1.1)
Marital status	
Single	242 (92.0)
Married	20 (7.6)
Widowed	1 (0.4)
Educational attainment	
Secondary (high school)	2 (0.8)
Tertiary (college)	120 (45.6)
Postgraduate	141 (53.6)
Average monthly income	
<P11,000	18 (6.8)
P11,001–P20,000	18 (6.8)
P20,001–P130,000	142 (54.0)
P130,001–220,000	15 (5.7)
More than P220,000	6 (2.3)
Not applicable	64 (24.3)

postgraduate degrees. Regarding average monthly income, 54% reported earning between P20,001 and P130,000.

Table 2 illustrates the social media platforms used by participants and their engagement. The top three most used platforms were Facebook (94.3%), Instagram (89.0%), and YouTube (84.4%). A substantial 87.5% (230/263) of respondents used social media to search for health information related to skin, hair, and/or nails. Among these, 80.6% verified the credibility of the health information they encountered online. The most common source for verification was Google (70.3%), followed by online scientific databases/resources (48.3%), and dermatology-specific society websites such as the Philippine Dermatological Society (PDS) website (28.5%).

Approximately 53.2% (140/263) of respondents shared dermatology-related health information from social media with others. Of these, 89.3% (125/140) verified the information's credibility before sharing. Furthermore, 74.1% (195/263) of respondents reported being influenced by social media messages regarding their or their family's health, specifically related to skin, hair, and nails. A majority of these 195 influenced participants either started treatment (70.8%) or changed treatment (49.2%) after seeking online dermatology-related health information.

More than half (51%) of the respondents sought further consultation with a board-certified dermatologist after reading health information on social media. The predominant modality for these consultations was face-to-face (84.3%). Teleconsultation/Teledermatology was utilized by 13.3%, and 18.3% used both.

Table 2: Usage and social media platform used among the study participants (n=263)

Variable	n (%)
1. Which of the following social media platforms do you use?	
Facebook	248 (94.3)
Youtube	222 (84.4)
TikTok	110 (41.8)
Instagram	234 (89.0)
Snapchat	5 (1.9)
Twitter	200 (76.0)
2. Have you used social media to search for health information pertaining to the skin, hair, and/or nails?	
No	33 (12.5)
Yes	230 (87.5)
2.1. If yes, do you verify the credibility of the health information you read/see on social media?	
No	18 (6.8)
Yes	212 (80.6)
“No” in the previous question (#2)	33 (12.5)
2.1.1. If yes, which sources do you use for information verification? you may choose more than one	
Textbooks	62 (23.6)
Google/default search engine	185 (70.3)
Government health website/s	67 (25.5)
Hospital website/s	49 (18.6)
Dermatology-specific society websites*	75 (28.5)
Online scientific database/s or resource/s†	127 (48.3)
Others	14 (5.3)
“No” in the previous question (#2.1)	51 (19.4)
3. Do you share the dermatology-related health information you read on social media to other people?	
No	123 (46.8)
Yes	140 (53.2)
3.1. If yes, do you verify the credibility of the said health related information before sharing it with other people?	
No	15 (5.7)
Yes	125 (47.5)
“No” in the previous question (#3)	123 (46.8)
4. Do messages on social media platforms ever influence your decisions regarding you or your family's health care (specifically with regard to your skin, hair, and nail)?	
No	68 (25.9)
Yes	195 (74.1)
4.1. If yes, which of the following have you tried doing after seeking dermatology-related health information online? you may choose more than one	
Start treatment	138 (52.5)
Change treatment	96 (36.5)
Stop treatment	53 (20.2)
None	29 (11.0)
“No” in the previous question (#4)	68 (25.9)
5. Do you seek further consult with a board-certified dermatologist after reading health information on social media?	
No	115 (43.7)
Yes	134 (51.0)
Yes but unsure if dermatologist is board-certified	14 (5.3)
5.1. If yes, which of the following modalities have you used when consulting with a dermatologist?	
Face-to-face consultation	65 (24.7)
Teleconsultation/teledermatology	35 (13.3)
Both	48 (18.3)
“No” in the previous question (#5)	115 (43.7)

*Such as the Philippine Dermatological Society website, †PubMed, Science direct, Google Scholar, up to date, etc.

DISCUSSION

This study found that a large majority of Filipino adult social media users (87.5%) sought dermatology-related health information online, with most verifying the credibility of the information they encountered. Social media influenced the health-related decisions of 74.1% of respondents, prompting actions such as starting, changing, or stopping treatment, and more than half (51%) subsequently sought consultation with a board-certified dermatologist.

Social media, defined as web-based or mobile platforms enabling the sharing of ideas and information,^[13] offers an efficient avenue for users, patients, and their relatives to access information from other users, ask for help and advice, make contributions, receive assistance from forums, and share experiences within a community.^[8] This accessibility often leads to more effective and personalized information retrieval compared to traditional search engines. Consequently, social media platforms have emerged as significant online venues for the exchange of health-related information and advice, with potential implications for patient health outcomes.

This study delved into the characteristics of Filipino adults who seek dermatology-related health information on social media and investigated its influence on their behavior concerning skin, hair, and nail problems. The typical participant was a female (60.5%), single (92.0%), highly educated (53.6% with postgraduate degrees), and belonged to the middle class (54.0%). The most frequently used platforms were Facebook (94.3%), Instagram (89.0%), and YouTube (84.4%). These findings align with recent data on the top social media platforms in the Philippines.^[6]

The high percentage of respondents (87.5%) using social media for skin, hair, and nail health information underscores the platforms' mainstream role in health information seeking. This trend is particularly relevant to dermatology, given the inherent visual nature of skin conditions, which has spurred the growth of social media use in this domain over the past decade.^[3] Importantly, a large majority (80.6%) of these users verified the credibility of the information they encountered. This aligns with findings by Iftikhar and Abaalkhail (2017) that patients with higher educational attainment are more likely to verify social media-derived information. Studies indicate that individuals with lower educational levels may struggle more with evaluating the authenticity of online health information and exhibit lower trust in it. It is not surprising that Google was the primary verification source (700%), given its global dominance as a search engine.^[14] Notably, the PDS website

ranked third (28.5%) as a verification source, indicating its growing recognition as a credible online resource for dermatologic health information.

The finding that 53.2% of respondents shared dermatology-related health information from social media highlights the unprecedented level of interconnectivity facilitated by these platforms.^[3] The fact that 89.3% of those who share information verified its authenticity before doing so is crucial. In an era marked by rapid information flow and increasing disinformation, the ability to discern factual information from opinion, and detect misinformation, is paramount. Enhancing information literacy skills among consumers is vital for combating “fake news” and disinformation, implying a role for dermatologists in guiding patients on responsible online information consumption.^[15]

A significant proportion of respondents (74.1%) reported being influenced by social media in their healthcare decisions, specifically concerning skin, hair, and nails. This influence frequently translated into tangible actions: 52.5% started treatment, and 36.5% changed their current regimen after seeking online dermatologic health information. While potentially alarming, these findings are consistent with previously published data on self-medication in skin diseases, where prevalence rates range from 6.0% to 45.0%.^[16] A 2016 study in Togo reported a high self-medication rate (67.7%) among dermatologic patients, identifying female sex, prolonged disease duration, and certain skin disease types as associated factors, while a high level of education acted as a protective factor.^[17] Social media platforms offer dermatologists a powerful avenue to counter medical misinformation and disseminate accurate, evidence-based dermatologic medicine to the public.^[18] The results of this study underscore social media's significant role in shaping dermatologic patients' behaviors, particularly concerning initiating and altering treatments based on online information.

Ultimately, more than half of the respondents (51%) chose to seek consultation with a board-certified dermatologist after engaging with health information on social media. The overwhelming preference (84.3%) was for face-to-face consultations. However, teledermatology was also utilized by a considerable number of consumers, highlighting its continued relevance as an important modality.

This study represents the first local endeavor to assess how social media influences Filipino adults' approach to their skin, hair, and nail health, its impact on self-medication practices stemming from social media messages, and

whether it prompts subsequent consultation with a board-certified dermatologist. It is important to acknowledge certain limitations: the use of nonprobability purposive sampling means the sample population may not fully represent the broader community. In addition, as a descriptive cross-sectional study, it cannot definitively establish a causal association between social media use and specific dermatology-related behaviors.

CONCLUSION

To date, a descriptive study exploring the characteristics of Filipino patients who utilize social media as a health information tool for dermatologic concerns, and its influence on their disease perception, decisions for further evaluation and management, or medication compliance, has been lacking. This study fills that gap by providing baseline information crucial for both patients and healthcare providers in the Philippines. As more individuals turn to online sources for health information and education, it becomes increasingly imperative for dermatologists to comfortably and ethically facilitate educational content on social media. This study also suggests that social media platforms can serve as effective marketing tools for clinical dermatologic practices. In the digital era, health education must be accurate, evidence-based, and regulated. Therefore, the findings of this study can significantly aid the PDS in its efforts to disseminate and regulate accurate information pertaining to skin, hair, and nails online.

Acknowledgment

The authors would like to acknowledge all participants who generously gave their time to complete the online questionnaire for this study.

Financial support and sponsorship

Nil.

Conflicts of interest

There are no conflicts of interest.

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