

## BRIDGING THE GAP: THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS IN ADDRESSING UNMET DERMATOLOGY SERVICE NEEDS IN UGANDA

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### ABSTRACT

The demand for dermatology services in Uganda far exceeds the available resources, creating significant unmet needs. Social media platforms offer a cost-effective and accessible solution for bridging this gap. This study examines the role of social media in improving dermatology services by providing education, increasing access to care, and enhancing patient-provider communication. Additionally, it highlights challenges such as misinformation, privacy concerns, and the digital divide while proposing strategies to optimize the benefits of social media in dermatology.

**Keywords:** Social Media, Dermatology, Uganda, Healthcare Access, Digital Health, Telemedicine, Tele dermatology

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### INTRODUCTION

Skin diseases are a common health concern in Uganda, affecting individuals of all ages and socioeconomic backgrounds with an estimated life prevalence of 70% (Namutebi, 2023). However, access to dermatology services is limited due to a shortage of specialists, high costs, and geographical barriers (Gibbs, 1996). Social media platforms, such as Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, X (formally Twitter), YouTube, and TikTok, have become popular tools for information sharing and engagement (Szeto et al., 2024). Leveraging these platforms for dermatology services can help address the existing gaps in healthcare delivery, particularly in underserved areas.

The purpose of this study is to assess how social media platforms can be utilized to address the unmet need for dermatology services in Uganda.

### The Unmet Need for Dermatology Services in Uganda

Uganda has a severe shortage of dermatologists, with only 13 registered specialists serving a population of over 45 million (Mundeli and Mohamed, 2024). This shortage leads to delayed diagnoses, poor management of skin conditions, and increased morbidity and mortality from skin-related conditions. Rural areas are particularly underserved, as most specialists are concentrated in urban centers (Lipoff et al., 2015). Furthermore, the stigma associated with certain skin conditions, such as vitiligo and acne, prevents many individuals from seeking timely care. This creates a pressing need for innovative solutions to improve access to dermatology services across the country.

### The Potential of Social Media Platforms

#### 1. Education and Awareness

Social media can be used to educate the public about common skin conditions, prevention methods, and when to seek medical care. Dermatologists and healthcare organizations can share posts, videos, and live sessions to raise awareness and dispel myths. For instance, infographics explaining the difference between fungal infections and eczema or videos on proper sunscreen use can reach thousands within minutes.

#### 2. Teleconsultation platforms

like WhatsApp and Facebook Messenger allow patients to consult dermatologists remotely. Patients can share images and receive advice without traveling long distances. This is particularly beneficial for individuals in rural areas who face significant barriers to accessing in-person care. Integrating artificial intelligence (AI) tools for image analysis can further enhance diagnostic accuracy and streamline consultations. This has been tried with platforms like Visual.

#### 3. Support Groups

Online communities for individuals with skin conditions provide emotional support and practical advice. These groups foster a sense of belonging and encourage adherence to treatment plans. For example, Facebook groups dedicated to psoriasis or vitiligo can help members share experiences, coping strategies, and reliable treatment options.

#### 4. Advocacy and Fundraising

Social media campaigns can raise awareness about the importance of dermatology services, advocate for policy changes, and mobilize resources for

underprivileged patients. Crowdfunding through platforms like GoFundMe or Facebook Fundraisers can help cover treatment costs for patients with severe conditions.

## 5. Research and Data Collection

Social media can also be a valuable tool for gathering data on skin conditions prevalent in Uganda. Researchers can analyze posts, comments, and trends to identify common concerns, knowledge gaps, and misconceptions. This information can guide public health interventions and policy development.

## Challenges and Risks

### 1. Misinformation

The spread of unverified and potentially harmful advice is a significant concern. Regulatory bodies must monitor content and promote credible sources. Dermatologists and healthcare organizations can collaborate to create verified accounts and share accurate information to counteract myths and scams.

### 2. Digital Divide

Limited internet access and digital literacy, especially in rural areas, hinder the widespread use of social media for healthcare. Efforts to expand affordable internet access and digital education programs are critical to bridging this divide.

### 3. Privacy Concerns

Sharing medical information on public platforms raises ethical and legal issues. Efforts must be made to ensure confidentiality by using secure messaging platforms and obtaining informed consent from patients.

### 4. Overreliance on social media

While social media is a valuable tool, it should complement, not replace, traditional healthcare systems. Patients may sometimes misinterpret advice or delay seeking professional care due to reliance on online consultations.

## Recommendations

### 1. Training and Partnerships

Healthcare providers should receive training on leveraging social media effectively. Partnerships with tech companies can enhance access and quality. For instance, collaborations with mobile network providers can offer subsidized data packages for health-related content.

## 2. Regulation and Oversight

Authorities should establish guidelines to ensure the accuracy and reliability of dermatology content on social media. A system for reporting and removing misleading information should be implemented.

## 3. Infrastructure Development

Expanding internet access and improving digital literacy in rural areas will increase the reach and impact of social media initiatives. Investments in mobile technology and community internet hubs can help achieve this goal.

## 4. Public-Private Collaborations

Government agencies, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and private companies can work together to create sustainable social media-based dermatology programs. These collaborations can include funding for teleconsultation services, creating educational campaigns, and promoting community engagement.

## CONCLUSION

Social media platforms hold immense potential to bridge the unmet need for dermatology services in Uganda. By leveraging these tools responsibly, healthcare providers can enhance education, access, and support for patients. Addressing challenges such as misinformation, privacy concerns, and the digital divide will be critical to maximizing the benefits of this approach. With strategic investments and collaborative efforts, social media can transform dermatology care delivery, making it more equitable and accessible for all Ugandans.

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## Conflict of Interest

We declare no conflict of interest.

## Author Contributions

Mukalazi Abraham: Conceptualization, methodology, writing – original draft, review & editing.  
Tumuhairwe Julian Katungi: Literature review, data analysis, writing – review & editing.

### Data Availability

The data supporting the findings of this study are available upon request from the corresponding author.

### Author Biography

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