

# HOW TO REACH MORE PATIENTS THROUGH INSTAGRAM



Post accurate, relevant, and engaging content that patients are compelled to consume.

BY DAGNY C. ZHU, MD

Social media has more than 4.2 billion active global users,<sup>1</sup> and our patients turn to it now more than ever to seek out health and medical information. From Facebook to Twitter to TikTok to Instagram, the popularity of social media platforms rivals that of internet searches

for health information. Social media offers an effective way to build the doctor-patient relationship, even before patients walk through the practice's doors.

The internet is the most frequently used source of health information, with up to 74% of American adults trusting it as their primary source.<sup>2,3</sup>

The visual nature of ophthalmology, however, creates a unique opportunity for image-based public platforms such as Instagram to be used to answer their health questions. Instagram is used by about 40% of the adult population.<sup>4</sup>

My colleagues and I recently conducted a study to characterize the top-performing ophthalmology-related posts on Instagram and identify opportunities to reach more patients and encourage greater engagement.<sup>5</sup> This article summarizes our results.

## BACKGROUND

A wide variety of ophthalmic information, ranging from educational content and case presentations to self-promotion and personal experiences, is posted on Instagram. Sources of information range from professional organizations and ophthalmology practices to individual practitioners and patients.

Our study included Instagram posts that featured layman's terms for ophthalmology-related conditions or at least one of 36 ophthalmology-related hashtags representing the most common conditions and procedures as identified by the AAO Intelligent Research in Sight Registry (Table). Between September 2000 and March 2021, more than 5.7 million Instagram posts were identified. The top nine posts for each hashtag (N = 972), as determined by Instagram's engagement level-based algorithm, were included in the study. The algorithm ranks posts based on the number of likes and comments they receive during a specific time period.

TABLE. LIST OF HASHTAG TERMS QUERIED

Hashtag Terms Queried*	Total Posts*	Hashtag Terms Queried*	Total Posts*
#Ophthalmology	1,078,100	#EyeDisease	50,300
#Glaucoma	679,000	#DiabeticRetinopathy	39,700
#Blepharoplasty	674,400	#Pterygium	33,200
#LASIK	557,900	#DryEyeSyndrome	28,200
#Ophthalmologist	442,600	#PterygiumSurgery	23,300
#EyeSurgery	367,100	#RetinalDetachment	22,526
#Cataract	303,200	#CornealTransplant	21,500
#CataractSurgery	180,500	#Vitrectomy	16,900
#LASIKSurgery	177,800	#CornealUlcer	15,500
#Myopia	169,800	#CornealAbrasion	15,000
#DryEyes	146,600	#Chalazion	11,000
#DryEye	112,800	#GlaucomaSurgery	7,000
#Oculoplastics	97,000	#RetinaSurgery	7,000
#LaserEyeSurgery	95,000	#Keratitis	4,800
#Ptosis	71,900	#ARMD	3,000
#MacularDegeneration	69,300	#PRKSurgery	3,000
#StrabismusSurgery	69,000	#Trabecuoplasty	1,500
#Strabismus	64,600	#OrbitalCellulitis	300
#Conjunctivitis	56,800		

\*Total posts captured are listed for each keyword. Hashtags are based on the AAO IRIS Registry and are general layman's terms to broadly identify ophthalmic content.

Abbreviations: AAO, American Academy of Ophthalmology; IRIS, Intelligent Research in Sight

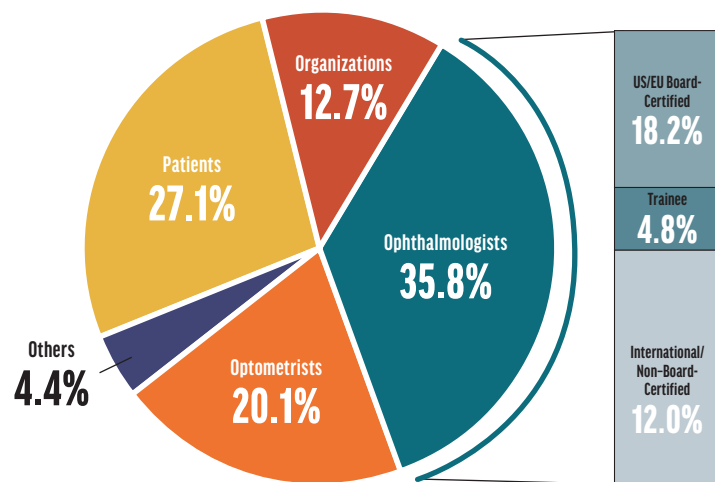


Figure. A breakdown of the authors of ophthalmology-related content included in the study.

All 972 posts were analyzed for the background (ie, organization, ophthalmologist, optometrist, or patient) and credentials (ie, trainee, board-certified, non-board-certified, or international) of the poster and the format (ie, photograph, graphic, or video), content (ie, educational, self-promotional, or personal experience), caption length (short, 1–8 lines; medium, 9–19 lines; and long,  $\geq 20$  lines), and engagement level ratio (ELR).

Examples of educational content included question-and-answer polls, slit-lamp photographs, fundus images, and videos of specific ophthalmic procedures. Posts that referenced the poster's practice and/or advertised the procedures available at their practices were considered self-promotional. Lastly, posts that included subjective or historical narratives specific to the individual were considered to be personal experience. Examples included practitioners sharing their experiences and challenges with treating a specific ophthalmic condition and patients sharing their perspectives on living with an ophthalmic condition.

## RESULTS

### Number and format of posts.

Ophthalmologists shared the highest percentage (35.8%) of posts, followed by patients (27.1%), optometrists (20.1%), and organizations (12.7%). Ophthalmologists consisted of US and EU board-certified practitioners,

trainees, and international and non-board-certified ophthalmologists (Figure). The most shared item was photographs (82.2%), followed by videos (8.8%) and graphics (8.4%).

**Subject matter.** More than half (56.3%) of the posts were educational in nature. Posts that detailed an individual's personal experience were the second greatest form of content and constituted 34% of posts. Self-promotional posts represented 9.3% of the content.

**Engagement level.** Ophthalmologists-in-training had the highest average ELR (0.096). Interestingly, patients had the second highest average ELR (0.084), followed by optometrists (0.070), all ophthalmologists (0.067), and organizations (0.051). When content was analyzed for ELR, the most popular posts were self-promotional (0.118) and personal experiences (0.091). The posts with the lowest ELR were educational (0.059). Videos were the most favored format and had an ELR of 0.110, followed by photographs and graphics (0.073 and 0.063, respectively).

**Top performers.** Posts that exhibited personal experiences, doctors in white coats, trainee authors, and selfies (ie, a close-up photograph of one or more individuals) constituted most of the 200 top performing posts (odds ratios: 3.335, 3.259, 3.172, and 2.185, respectively;  $P < .01$ ). Posts with shorter captions (odds ratio: 1.551;  $P < .01$ ) fared better than those with long captions (odds ratio: 0.700;  $P < .05$ ).

## THE BOTTOM LINE

The amount of ophthalmology-related content on Instagram is growing, and patients are using the site as an educational resource. Posting to Instagram therefore represents an avenue for ophthalmologists to engage with current and prospective patients. This can bolster the doctor-patient relationship, empower patients to seek treatment for their conditions, and strengthen clinical decision-making.<sup>6</sup>

Ophthalmologists can increase viewer engagement by incorporating some of the tactics that we have shown to produce a high ELR. These include posting selfies and pictures of themselves or other practitioners in white coats and sharing personal experiences. Educational posts that include slit-lamp and fundus photos, videos of surgical techniques, and infographics were found in our study to achieve lower ELRs than self-promotional posts and should therefore be used sparingly.

It can help to add a personal touch to educational posts by sharing a personal perspective or experience and to use short captions that resonate with consumers. All shared material should be accurate and relevant to patients' needs. ■

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