

| Social Media Marketing: A Guide *for* Healthcare Providers

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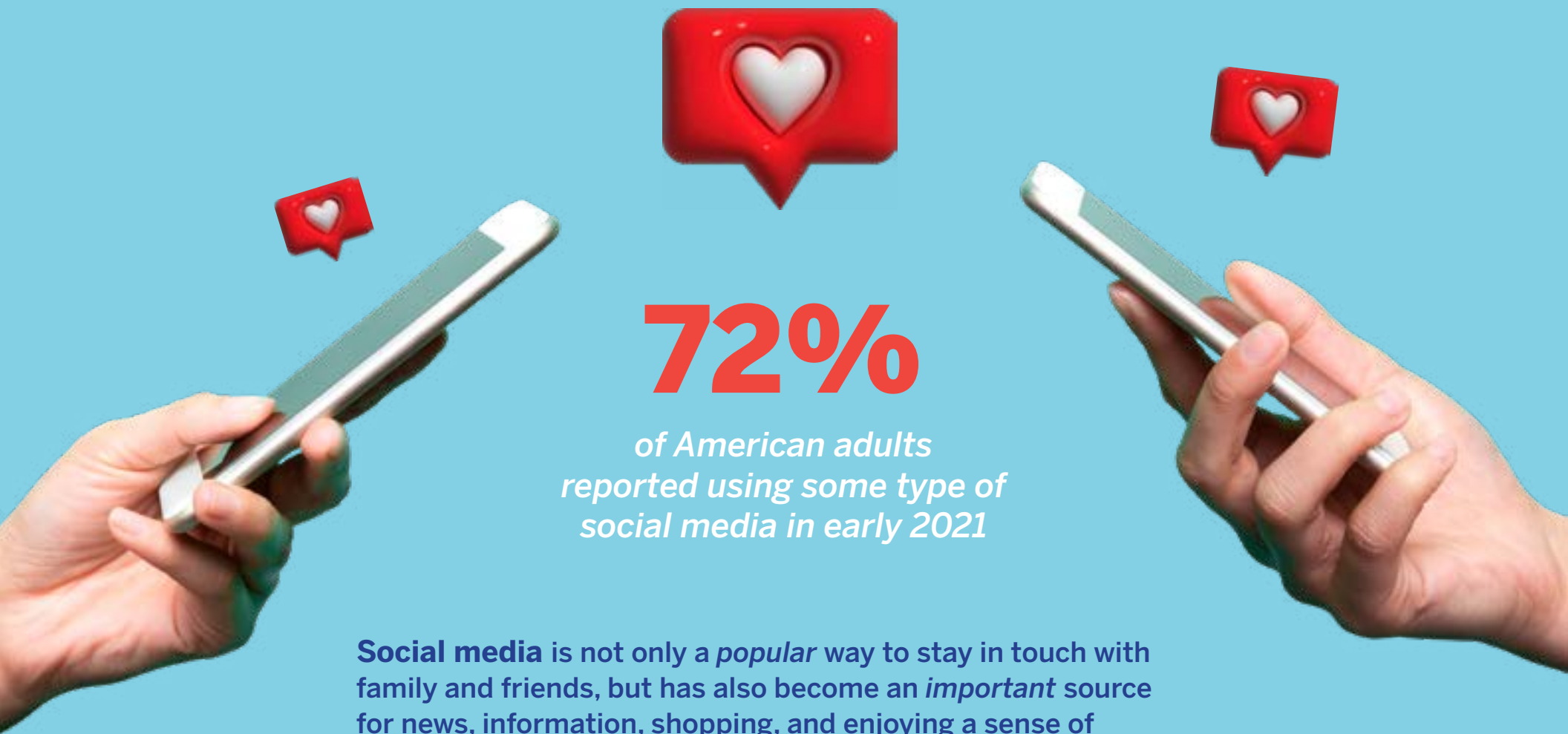
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72%

*of American adults
reported using some type of
social media in early 2021*

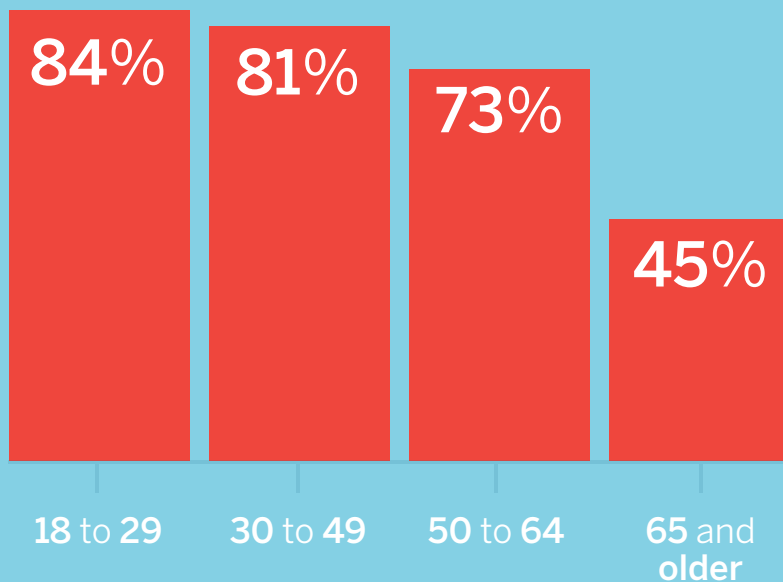
Social media is not only a *popular* way to stay in touch with family and friends, but has also become an *important* source for news, information, shopping, and enjoying a sense of **community**.

According to data from the **Pew Research Center**, social media use among American adults has experienced a steady rise since 2005, growing from a mere **5%** then to the whopping **72%** of American adults who reported using some type of social media in early 2021.



Pew Research also notes that although young adults were the early adopters of social media and continue to be quite active today, older adults have increasingly embraced these platforms in recent years.

In a 2021 survey, the following age groups reported using social media:



As far as the platforms themselves, in 2021, YouTube and Facebook were the most popular, with 81% of survey participants reporting using YouTube at some point and 69% saying the same about Facebook.

Results for the remainder of the platforms included in the survey that year were:



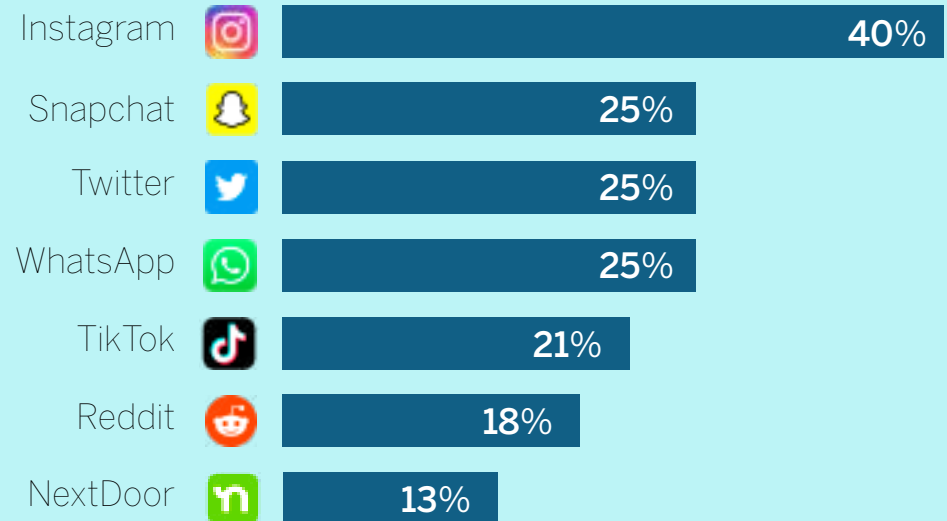
81%

Of participants use YouTube at some point



69%

Of participants use Facebook at some point



Pinterest

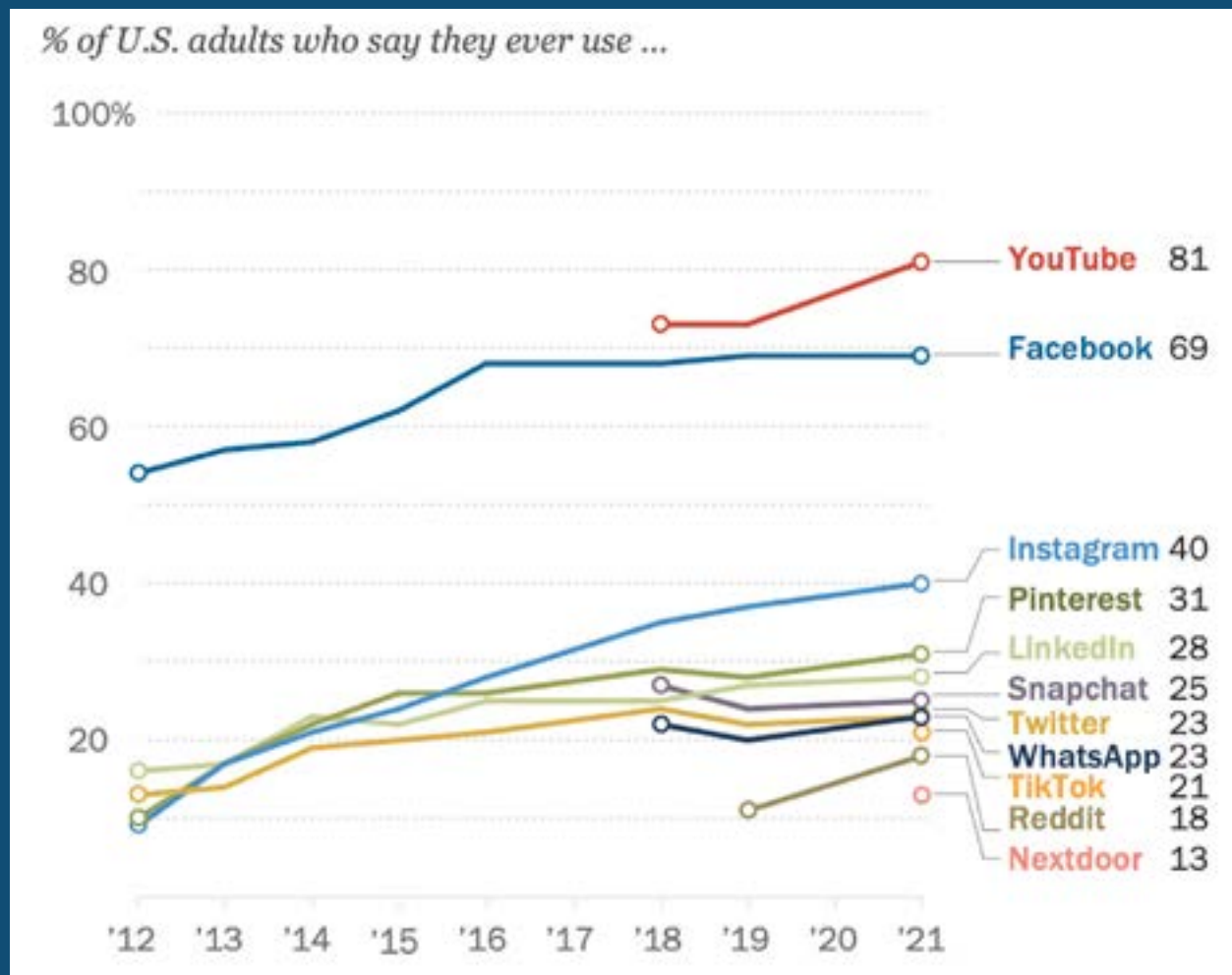


LinkedIn



about
3 in 10

Growing share of Americans say they use YouTube; Facebook remains one of the most widely used online platforms among U.S. Adults



Note: Respondents who did not give an answer are not shown. Pre-2018 telephone poll data is not available for YouTube, Snapchat and WhatsApp; pre-2019 telephone poll data is not available for Reddit. Pre-2021 telephone poll data is not available for TikTok. Trend data is not available for Nextdoor.

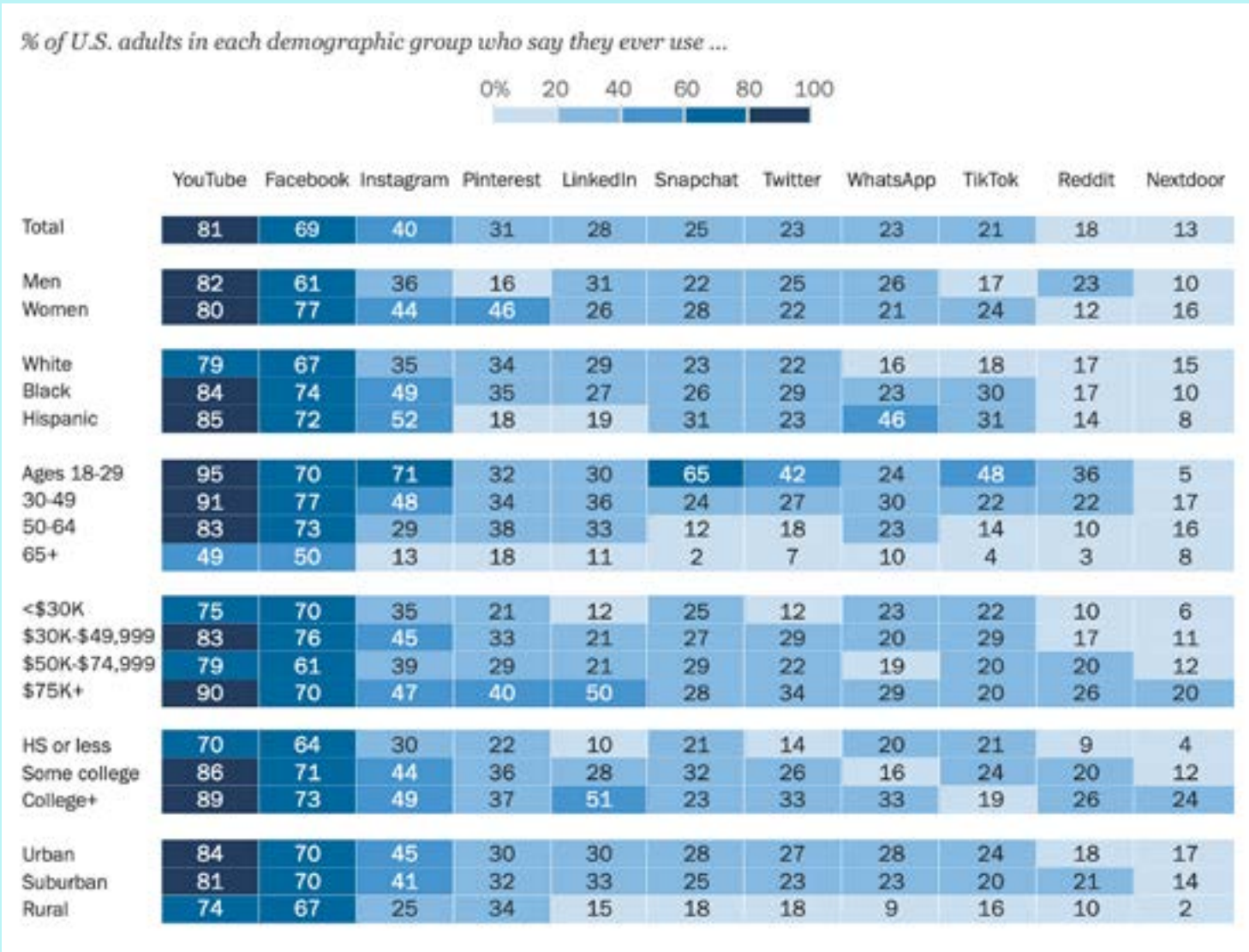
Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted Jan.25-Feb. 8, 2021. "Social Media Use in 2021"

Pew Research Center

"Social Media Use in 2021." Pew Research Center, Washington, D.C. (April 7, 2021)
<https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2021/04/07/social-media-use-in-2021/>

In terms of demographics, usage varied among groups:

Use of online platforms, apps varies - sometimes widely - by demographic group

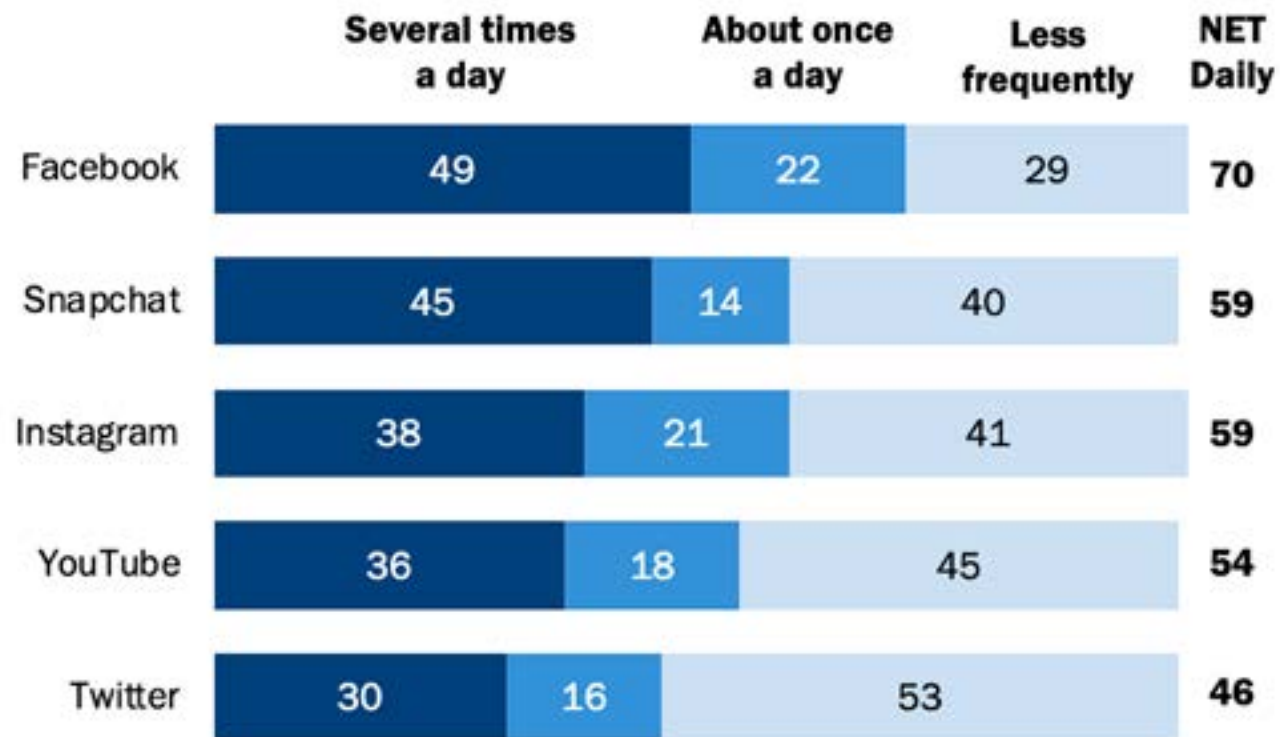


Note: White and Black adults include those who report being only one race and are not Hispanic. Not all numerical differences between groups shown are statistically significant (e.g., there are no statistically significant differences between the shares of White, Black or Hispanic Americans who say they use Facebook). Respondents who did not give an answer are not shown.

Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted Jan.25-Feb.8, 2021.
“Social Media Use in 2021”
Pew Research Center

Additionally, users of some social media sites make daily visits—and may check in several times a day.

Among U.S. adults who say they use ___, % who use that site ...



Note: Respondents who did not give an answer are not shown. “Less frequently” category includes users who visit these sites a few times a week, every few weeks or less often.

Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted Jan.25-Feb. 8, 2021. “Social Media Use in 2021”

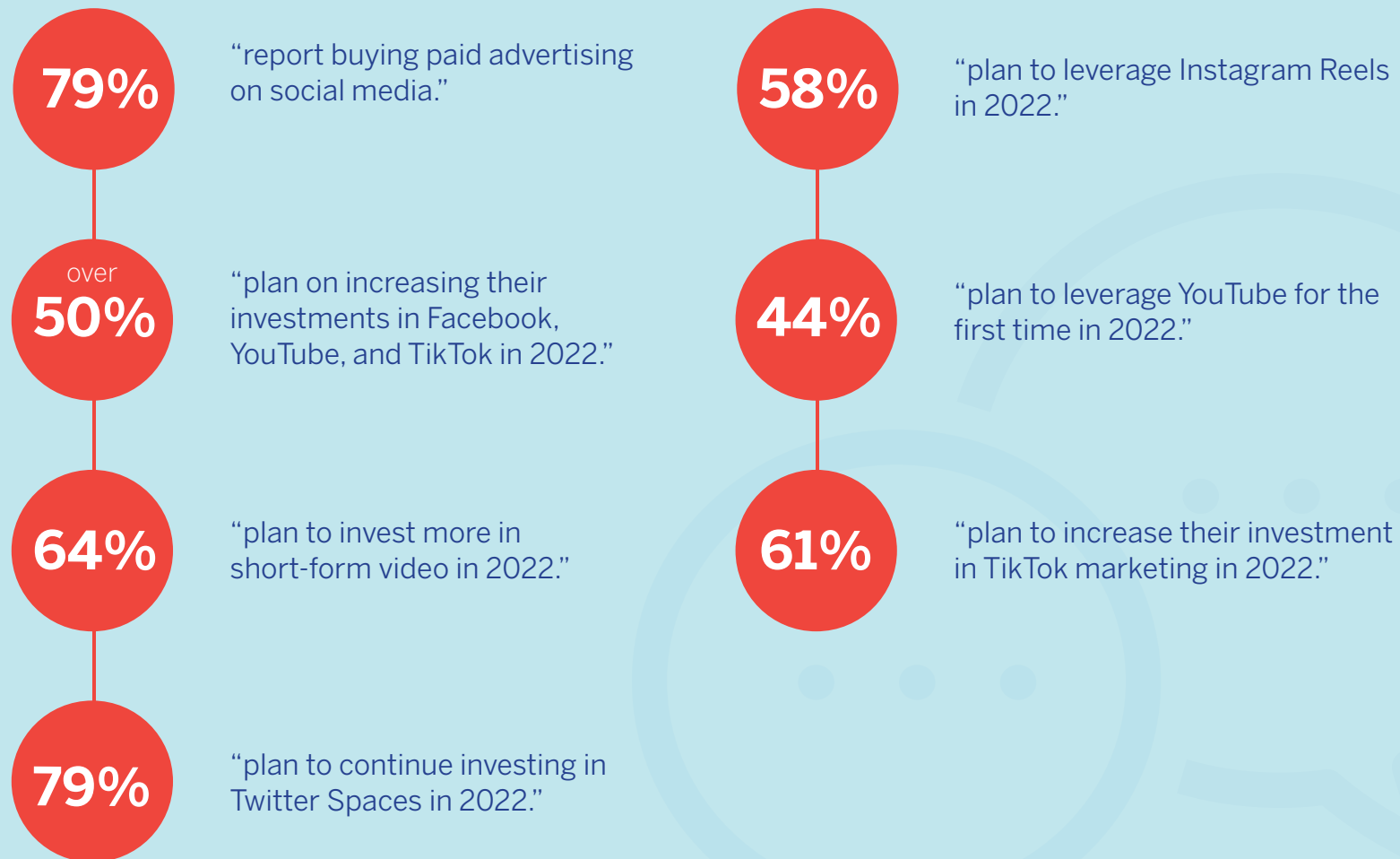
Pew Research Center

“Social Media Use in 2021.” Pew Research Center, Washington, D.C. (April 7, 2021)

<https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2021/04/07/social-media-use-in-2021/>

The **Pew Research** survey was conducted in February of 2021, and as we move into 2022, additional sources indicate **continued** growth in social media use. With that kind of access to consumers, it's no wonder marketers are *embracing* robust social media strategies—as demonstrated by the following social media marketing stats from 2021 **HubSpot** polling.

Of marketers polled:



| Social Media Use *in* Healthcare

As evidenced by the stats presented so far, social media plays an increasingly important role in society as a whole—and that includes the healthcare industry. With the shift to all-things-digital, a growing number of healthcare providers are recognizing social media as an important channel for a variety of purposes—including health education, marketing, and engaging with current and prospective patients.



One study, “[Social Media and Health Care, Part I: Literature Review of Social Media Use by Health Care Providers](#),” categorized social media uses by healthcare providers as “health promotion, career development or practice promotion, recruitment, professional networking or de-stressing, medical education, telemedicine, scientific research, influencing health behavior, and public health care issues.”

In addition to categorizing social media uses, the study also identified the four “most common” areas in which it plays a “major role” in the healthcare industry:



Health promotion



Research



Marketing and branding for individuals and practices



Recruitment

While social media can play a key role in all of those areas, here we'll concentrate on the use of social media for health promotion, as well as healthcare marketing and branding.

| Social Media for Health Promotion

Of course, health promotion can also be referred to as health education. The intense dynamics associated with the COVID-19 pandemic underscore the importance of offering timely and reliable information that consumers can trust.

The study captures the growing role of social media in this context like this:

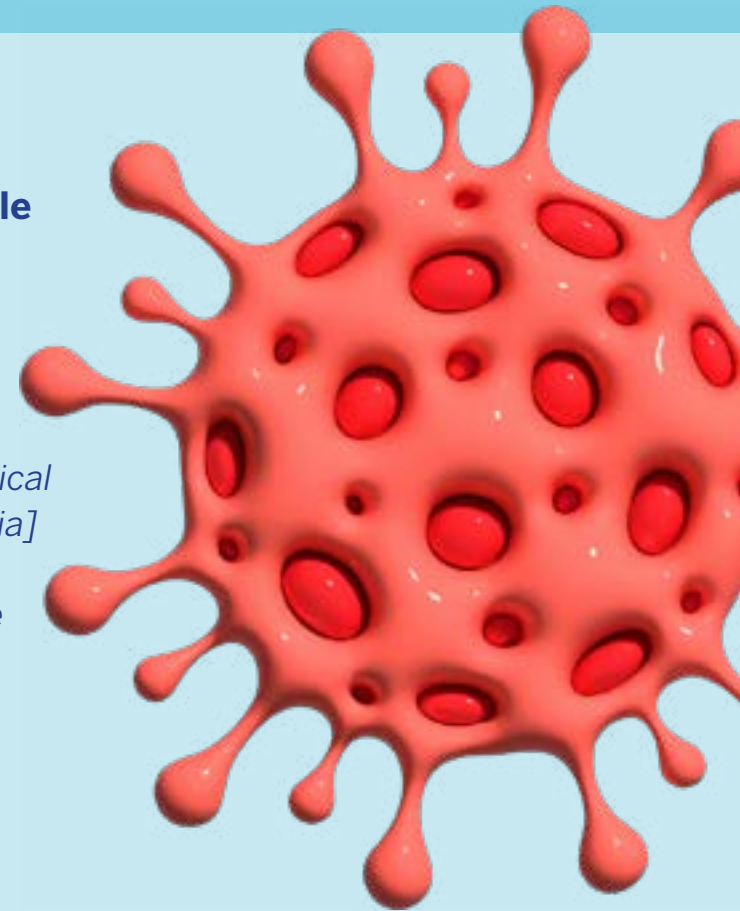
“Over the years, an increasing number of public health organizations, medical institutes, and HCPs [healthcare professionals] are using SM [social media] tools to disseminate visually rich public health messages to the general public. The primary goal is to share solid, evidence-based, and up-to-date health information that educates and affects millions of SM users and to dispel common misconceptions and counterbalance inaccurate material rapidly spreading through SM.”



Providing health education through social media is also a great way to demonstrate thought leadership and healthcare expertise—which can be highly valuable for consumers who are on the hunt for a new practitioner or healthcare institution.

In this context of recruiting patients, social media is such a powerful tool that one of the studies reviewed found that having a social media presence was even more effective in Google search ranking than a provider's educational background and experience.

In “Google Ranking of Plastic Surgeons Values Social Media Presence Over Academic Pedigree and Experience,” researchers concluded: “For the past few decades, plastic surgery practices relied on referrals, word of mouth, and the surgeon's reputation and academic pedigree to attract new patients. It is now clear that this practice-building model is being rapidly supplanted by a new paradigm based on social media presence to reach potential patients.”



| Social Media for Healthcare Marketing and Branding

In addition to being an effective tool for health education, social media can also play a valuable role in marketing, brand building, and increasing patient engagement. *However*, developing and deploying an effective social media strategy is important to ensure best results, as the literature review underscores: “With the extended use of SM among patients and HCPs, practitioners must now compete for patients’ attention and need to be strategic regarding the content they share and platforms they use.”

The review refers to the processes healthcare providers use to establish a “*digital social network*” through social media, as a “haven for viral marketing, which can be leveraged to create a name, develop a digital voice, and disseminate health information in a timely and cost-efficient way.”



Additionally, study authors offer several recommendations regarding messaging:

- “When designing SM campaigns and interventions to disseminate health information, it is important to develop messages that may be more likely to resonate with and elicit reactions from individuals.”
- “Messages tailored to certain population segments are more effective than generic messages, as tailored messages address the specific needs of their recipients.”
- “...interactive (two-way) communication is more effective than linear (one way) communication.”
- “Importantly, SM must complement rather than replace traditional health promotion.”

| How Patients Use Social Media



*In the second part of the study, “Social Media and Health Care (Part II): Narrative Review of Social Media Use by Patients,” researchers sought to better understand how patients use social media in relation to healthcare and concluded that “**It is indisputable that patients greatly incorporate social media in seeking health care and that the public is heavily reliant on it to obtain health care information.**”*

Their conclusion is based on findings that include:

- “For a good proportion of the public, young people in particular, social networking sites are the first resource to find general and health-related information.”
- “Many individuals with a medical concern are now seeking answers on the web and can virtually obtain them at anytime from anywhere. Social media has radically transformed the way patients obtain information about procedures as well.”
- One of the studies cited found that “the first motive of patients for health-related use of social media is seeking information about health, a disease, or treatment of a disease...”

However, they also note that “the amount of information available may be overwhelming, and the sources may be unverified,” underscoring the need for healthcare providers to offer clear, reliable, evidence-based health information that patients and prospects can trust.

As far as marketing potential, the study authors describe social media as “*the new word of mouth.*”

Citing several studies, they describe the powerful patient recruitment effect that’s possible: “...a considerable number of patients are currently searching for HCPs on social media. Some make educated decisions after comprehensive research on the academic qualifications and experience of the practitioner, whereas others follow their emotions after encountering an inviting post or an attractive image, with the latter comprising a huge pool of patients.”

Not only is social media “*the new word of mouth,*” the study authors also said that “Recommendations or opinions of users have been perceived to be more credible than other advertisement methods, mainly because of the personal nature of the communication that takes place between users on social media.”

| Important Issues for Healthcare Providers



Although social media is popular for both patients and providers, there are important issues healthcare providers must keep in mind when using it—such as the need to maintain professionalism and regulatory compliance.



| Maintaining Professionalism



As the authors of the second study note, “Connections established through social media may dissolve the boundaries between professional and personal lives.”

They cited one recent study that found that “patients often extend internet friend requests to their physicians on Facebook.” However they note that this type of “personal web-based communication between practitioners and patients” isn’t recommended: “Personal boundaries may be violated by inappropriate curiosity, as social media can provide a wealth of information about its users. Patients may have unrestricted access to the personal information of HCPs available on the internet, and HCPs also have access to patient information that may not be available in the health care setting.”

Overall, when using social media, it’s important for healthcare professionals to maintain professionalism across the board, as they also note: “It is paramount that HCPs realize that professional demeanor is expected on the internet as in real life. Although no formal contract is established between HCPs and patients in the web-based world, the same rights and responsibilities traditionally applied should be considered on the internet.”

| Maintaining Regulatory Compliance



*Although social media can be an effective marketing tool, it can do more harm than good if healthcare organizations fail to maintain regulatory compliance. Here, we're certainly not offering legal advice or trying to cover all of the regulatory issues that may be involved. Instead, we're going to touch on three compliance concerns that are particularly important when it comes to healthcare social media marketing: those related to **HIPAA**, the **Federal Trade Commission** (FTC), and the **U.S. Food and Drug Administration** (FDA).*

| HIPAA

*When the **Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act of 1996** (HIPAA) was rolled out, social media wasn't all the rage that it is today. However, the rules still apply.*

*The **U.S. Department of Health and Human Services** (HHS) provides a little background on the privacy aspects of HIPAA: “To improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the health care system, the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act of 1996 (HIPAA), Public Law 104-191, included Administrative Simplification provisions that required HHS to adopt national standards for electronic health care transactions and code sets, unique health identifiers, and security. At the same time, Congress recognized that advances in electronic technology could erode the privacy of health information. Consequently, Congress incorporated into HIPAA provisions that mandated the adoption of Federal privacy protections for individually identifiable health information.”*



HHS provides many resources related to **HIPAA**—including an overview of subsequent, related rules and a summary of the Privacy Rule.

“A major goal of the Privacy Rule is to assure that individuals’ health information is properly protected while allowing the flow of health information needed to provide and promote high quality health care and to protect the public’s health and wellbeing. The Rule strikes a balance that permits important uses of information, while protecting the privacy of people who seek care and healing. Given that the health care marketplace is diverse, the Rule is designed to be flexible and comprehensive to cover the variety of uses and disclosures that need to be addressed” (For more, please see the summary and the Privacy Rule section to view it in its entirety).

On its HIPAA and marketing page, HHS notes that “The **HIPAA** Privacy Rule gives individuals important controls over whether and how their protected health information is used and disclosed for marketing purposes. With limited exceptions, the Rule requires an individual’s written authorization before a use or disclosure of his or her protected health information can be made for marketing. So as not to interfere with core health care functions, the Rule distinguishes marketing communications from those communications about goods and services that are essential for quality health care.”

HHS also notes that “*The Privacy Rule addresses the use and disclosure of protected health information for marketing purposes by:*

- 1 Defining what is ‘marketing’ under the Rule;
- 2 Excepting from that definition certain treatment or health care operations activities;
- 3 Requiring individual authorization for all uses or disclosures of protected health information for marketing purposes with limited exceptions.”

.....
For further details and examples, please visit **HHS’ marketing page**.



HIPAA Journal also offers in-depth guidance about **HIPAA** and social media, noting that although **HIPAA** was enacted prior to the arrival of social media networks and lacks social-media specific rules, “as with all healthcare-related communications, the **HIPAA Privacy Rule** still applies whenever covered entities or business associates – or employees of either – use social media networks.”

The publication offers a number of recommendations to better ensure that healthcare organizations maintain **HIPAA** compliance when using social media:



Implement a HIPAA social media policy: *“The HIPAA Privacy Rule prohibits the disclosure of ePHI on social media networks without the express consent of patients. This includes any text about specific patients as well as images or videos that could result in a patient being identified.”*



Strictly follow rules regarding patient consent: *“PHI can only be included in social media posts if a patient has given their consent, in writing, to allow the publication of their personal information. In such circumstances, PHI can only be used for the purpose specifically mentioned in the consent form.”*



Train employees on HIPAA social media rules: *“The popularity of social media networks combined with the ease of sharing information means HIPAA training should include the use of social media. If employees are not specifically trained on HIPAA social media rules it is highly likely that violations will occur.”*



HIPAA Journal also offers an extensive list of basic [HIPAA Social Media Guidelines](#) and **Sprout Social** offers a related resource that may help, too: [“Supporting HIPAA-Compliance on Social: A Cheat Sheet.”](#)

| Federal Trade Commission (FTC)



Another regulatory body that healthcare organizations need to keep in mind when it comes to social media marketing is the Federal Trade Commission (FTC).

In “Healthcare Advertising: Understanding the FTC’s Role and Regulations,” **Richard Lawson** of law firm **Manatt, Phelps & Phillips, LLP** describes the role of the FTC as compared to the FDA: “The laundry list of side effect warnings featured in pharmaceutical ads—which typically account for two-thirds of healthcare marketing expenditures—is the result of the **Food and Drug Administration’s** (FDA) regulatory authority over the pharmaceutical industry. Promotional activities by other healthcare stakeholders—such as hospitals, health systems and clinics—often fall outside of the FDA’s jurisdiction and are subject to the general advertising rules and regulations enforced by the **Federal Trade Commission** (FTC).”

*In this context, he notes that advertising regulations are based on the **FTC Act’s** “prohibition of unfair and deceptive acts or practices,” which are defined by the **FTC’s** “three-part standard for the determination of a deceptive practice:*

- 1 The representation must mislead or be likely to mislead the consumer;
- 2 The consumer’s interpretation must be reasonable under the circumstances; and
- 3 The misleading misrepresentation, omission or practice must be material.”

Lawson also describes additional **FTC** guidelines related to the “*substantiation of claims and consumer endorsements*,” which he says are “*particularly relevant to healthcare marketing*.”

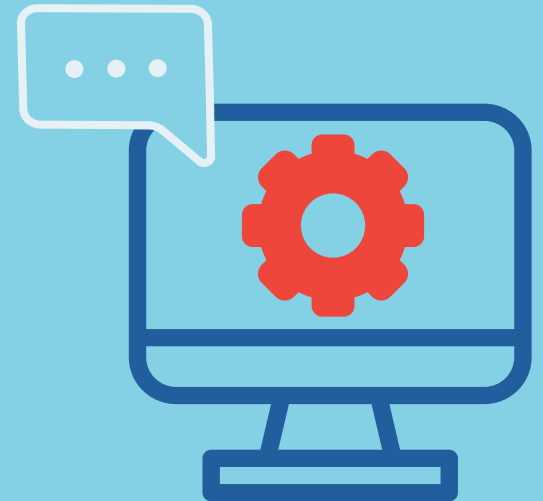


In this context, he notes that the **FTC** “has made it clear that before disseminating an advertisement, the advertiser must substantiate all claims—express and implied—that the ad conveys to reasonable consumers.” **Additionally**, it says it’s important to “be mindful” of how prospective patients may understand the ad.

Regarding patient endorsements, **Lawson** offers this guidance: “Just as treatment claims must be substantiated as typical, patient endorsements also must reflect typical outcomes. The **FTC** has stated that patient endorsements must speak to the kind of result that the average patient would reasonably expect to experience. If the endorsement does not present the typical result, then the advertisement must disclose what the typical result would be.”

And if that sounds like a “*results not typical*” disclaimer might cover your bases, **Lawson** says that’s not the case: “It is important to note that ‘results not typical’ is an insufficient disclaimer. The **FTC** expects an advertiser to disclose the actual typical result in the advertisement.”

He also underscores the fact that **FTC** law applies in the digital world the same as in traditional media.



The **FTC** has issued specific guidance for digital marketing,” he writes. “The most important standard for marketers to be aware of is that if the necessary disclaimers can’t be fit into the digital medium, then the ad probably should not be run.



| U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA)

Here's how the FDA describes its role in the context of drug advertising and its authority in this area: “**The Food and Drug Administration (FDA)** protects public health by assuring the safety, effectiveness, and security of a wide range of products, including human prescription drugs. We also advance public health by helping people get the accurate, science-based information they need to use medicines appropriately and improve their health.”



The **FDA** also notes that: “...Congress also gave the **Food and Drug Administration (FDA)** authority to oversee prescription drug ads. In turn, the **FDA** passed regulations detailing how it would enforce those requirements. These regulations are also known as ‘rules.’”

*The **FDA** also offers more detailed information on laws, regulations, guidances, and enforcement actions regarding drug marketing, advertising, and communications.*

| Tips to Inform Your Social Media Strategy



Now that we've covered the power of social media for marketing, how social media is used in healthcare, and important issues that healthcare providers must keep in mind—we wanted to offer some tips from social media experts to help inform your social media strategy.

Hootsuite agrees that social media is an important tool that healthcare providers can use for health education and promotion—as well as public outreach campaigns, “since you can specifically target relevant population groups.”

The company also says that social media can be used to “**expand the reach of existing resources.**” Although they’re referring to sharing new information and best practices between healthcare professionals, this approach also demonstrates the synergistic effect of making the most of your online presence to reach patients and prospects through various platforms and locations—such as **your website and other channels.**

In the context of regulatory compliance, the company offers some important advice: “You don’t want lawyers writing your social media posts. But you might want lawyers (or other compliance experts) to review posts before they go live. This is especially true for major announcements or posts that are particularly sensitive.”

Additionally, the company underscores the importance of:

- **Monitoring comments that users leave on your social media posts and profiles (since these can also get you into hot water when it comes to regulatory compliance)**
- **Responding to comments as appropriate to engage with followers**
- **Removing comments that may create privacy issues**
- **Keeping an eye out for “inappropriate claims”**
- **Maintaining cyber hygiene—including revoking access to your organization’s account if someone who previously had access is no longer employed there**



Sprout Social says healthcare social media accounts are unique because they’re “primarily focused on publishing content as opposed to juggling messages or obsessing over engagement rates.”

Social listening is a great way to gain important insights to help inform your social media strategy. Social listening is a technique for determining consumer sentiment by “*listening*” to common themes and trends on social media platforms. To do so, you can follow a chosen topic on social media—*which may be your brand*—and then **analyze** the related conversations and mentions to see how you can either improve the patient experience within your health system, or determine factors which should be integrated into brand strategy.

Some experts differentiate social listening from social monitoring, even noting that confusing the two can be a “costly” mistake, as noted in a recent post from Insights for Professionals: “*Social listening goes a step further than monitoring. It’s the process of looking past the numbers and thinking about the customer mood and sentiment that lies beneath this data. If you conduct social media monitoring but stop short of social listening, you could be depriving yourself of opportunities and risking reputational damage by failing to acknowledge people’s thoughts and feelings about your brand.*”



Ramping Up Your Social Media Efforts

Depending upon the size of your organization and resources available, one of the most challenging aspects of developing a social media strategy may be answering the question, “**Who’s going to do all of this?**”



It’s important to have a **social media lead** who is responsible for overseeing social media efforts in terms of planning, creating, posting, and monitoring social media accounts—all while ensuring compliance with regulations and the social media policy of the organization.

As you’re ramping up your social media efforts, here are a few additional tips to keep in mind:

- ***In terms of the messaging itself***, it’s helpful to follow a well-planned content strategy using a social media content calendar to better focus your efforts instead of posting randomly without a plan.
- **Be sure to follow platform-specific best practices regarding written content, graphics, and videos.**
- **Know the best time to post to achieve the most visibility and engagement.** Different resources offer various recommendations, but fortunately, Guide2Research compiled 2021 data from 27 of them in its recently-published resource, “[The Best Times to Post on Social Media: 2022 Studies & Statistics](#).”
- **Consider scheduling posts ahead of time to help lighten your load.** Although some platforms provide their own scheduling tools, you may want to consider a social media scheduling platform that offers a single dashboard for multiple sites.
- **Measure results so you’ll know what’s working and what’s not.** As with scheduling, some social media platforms offer analytics tools, and many scheduling platforms do, too. Once you know how effective your efforts are, you can tweak them accordingly.



**If all of this sounds daunting, the good news is that
Advance Healthcare Marketing can help.**

Contact us today to find out how we can help
elevate your social media marketing plan.

